10 TOP-NOTCH STORIES

10¢

# WESTERN SHORT STORIES

A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE

GUNHAWK, COUNT YOUR BULLETS!
by
L. L. FOREMAN

RANGE WHERE MEN DIED TWICE
epic drama
by
D. B. NEWTON

MARCH

GHOST GUARDS RIDE THE SUNSET STAGE
by PETER DAWSON

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10 TOP-NOTCH STORIES

# WESTERN SHORT STORIES

*Vol. 2, No. 4* — A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE — *March, 1939*

★ ★ ★ ALL STORIES IN THIS MAGAZINE ARE BRAND NEW ★ ★ ★

**Gunhawk, Count Your Bullets!**.....by L. L. Foreman Page

No query-eyed sheriff was going to sidetrack Peter Lash, nor all Silver Wells, if it came to that. This thing was predestined, burned into a thousand bitter vows—Peter Lash would keep his gun-date with death! 8

**The Wild Bunch Rides to War**.....by Ed Earl Repp 31

Scarp Tremaine's range devils were blazing a powdersmoke trail to Wild Bunch bounty, and the back-shooting of old Pop Stevens was the battle clarion that sent them to war!

**Ghost-Guards Ride the Sunset Stage**.....by Peter Dawson 41

Until those bullion-crazed badmen made a joke of justice and set a law-trap for his life, the only odds Llano Ackers had ever asked were his fists and his six-guns!

**Satan's Sixgun Prayer**.....by John Cody 62

Owlhoot gunnies, range-hard punchers didn't grin and walk away. For Holy Smoke had fore-doomed the gold dust that had come to Mariposa, and now he was making gun-talk!

**Drop Your Guns—and Live Longer**.....by Russell A. Bankson 67

Ozias Wilkins was no medico, but for explosive gunslicks he prescribed a dose of dynamite!

**Two Bulldoggers from Texas**.....by Brad Buckner 69

Yavapi Yates and Rusty Waller were lion-hearted rannies, but they ran into hell-on-Texas trouble when they tried to bulldog that locoed mountain maverick!

**A Hangnoose Won't Hold a Texan**.....by Gunnison Steele 75

Death was reaching out for lawman Duke Tolliver, and the only gent who could save him was the Texan he was taking back to the gallows!

**Range Where Men Died Twice**.....by D. B. Newton 80

This was his answer to the range baron's challenge—riding again to Belmont, single-handed, in an attempt to again take Creel's back-shooting secundo. But this time, Sheriff Bill Stewart knew, every citizen of that lead-tight town would be waiting for him—with a hangnoose in one hand, and a six-gun in the other!

**Born for Boothill**.....by Harvey Maddux 98

Gun-orphan, sidewinder, tinhorn, Kelby knew but one code—the bushwhack code of the owlhoot!

**Eternal Range Gets a Man**.....by Charles D. Richardson, Jr. 105

A blood-barrage lay between Dan Crawford and his brother—and they could blast it only back of six-gun sights!

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WISH I COULD AFFORD A NEW CAR
WISH I COULD MAKE MORE MONEY
WISH I COULD GET OUT OF DEBT
WISH I COULD AFFORD TO STEP OUT A BIT
WISH I COULD AFFORD TO SUPPORT A WIFE

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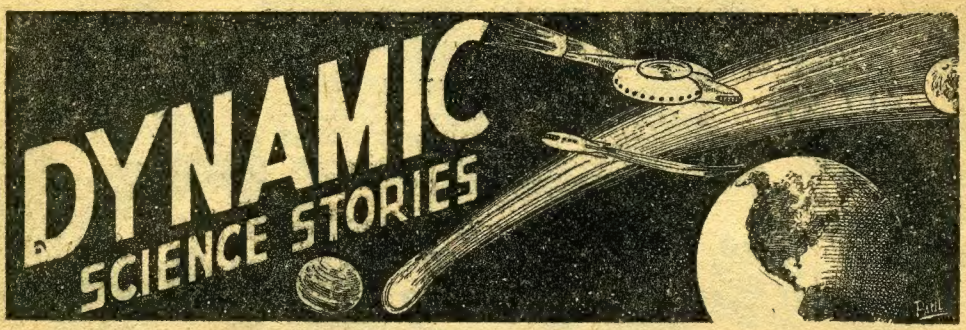


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Because Hannibal Spratt, inhuman dictator of Tranerica, wanted lovely Celia Stanwyck, his exploding time-machine made a space-devouring Catalyst of the Fourth Dimension, and sucked Celia out of 1938 into the mad mechanical hell of 2439!

2 GREAT LONG SCIENCE NOVELETTES

**MUTINEERS OF SPACE**.....**by Lloyd Arthur Eshbach**

Doomed by an interplanetary racketeer to slave their lives away for the rejuvenating sulphur crystals of Jupiter, what chance had those frail Terrestrials to escape the monstrous Jovians and blast their way 550,000,000 miles to Mercury and revenge!

**QUEST OF ZIPANTORIC**.....**by Robert Moore Williams**

Within that amazing bubble of flame was a beautiful girl, her hand holding a scepter symbol of Zipantoric—her gesture condemning Dick Markle and Dr. Burstone to the terrible wrath of a Mayan fire god's incredible scientific devices!

2 SUPER-SCIENCE SHORT STORIES

**THE MERCURIAN MENACE**.....**by Nelson S. Bond**

What fiendish creatures of flame lived on that macabre terrain which was the dark side of Mercury? Aided by the bouncing-ball humans of the hot side, Buzz Carson plunged too late into the chill anti-hell necromancy of that inexplicable land to join a lovely girl in a destiny of disintegration!

**THE MESSAGE FROM THE VOID**.....**by Hubert Mavity**

Mutual misunderstanding between Mars and Earth—because of two factors in the abstract beyond their comprehension!

ALSO SCIENCE DEPARTMENTS

# MARVEL 15¢ SCIENCE STORIES

**AFTER WORLD'S END**.....**by Jack Williamson**

Brain-staggering scientific mystery lay behind the want-ad Barry Horn answered on that October day in 1938. And Dona Keradin, the girl in the carbon crystal, drove him into the amnesia sleep of the cosmic rays, to awake ages thence, when the last of the Earthmen were fighting to the death against Malgarth, the Robot monster!

2 DYNAMIC SCIENCE NOVELETTES

**FASTER THAN LIGHT**.....**by D. D. Sharp**

Through a billion miles of cosmic space I searched for Veina's lost loveliness. And when the all-seeing eye of my ampliscope at last found her—twenty irreducible light years still intervened!

**THE SECOND MOON**.....**by R. R. Winterbotham**

Orson Welles' radio presentation of H. G. Wells' "War of the Worlds" could never have frozen our nation with sheer terror—had America, on that historic night of October 30, 1938, known Roger Sage!

2 EXCITING SHORT STORIES OF DAYS TO COME

**THE WEATHER ADJUDICATOR**.....**by Stanton Coblentz**

With unprecedented scientific daring Dictator Strumpf sought to regiment an entire nation's climate. And his dream would have become fact, had not those giant thermostatic controls created a ghastly social crisis!

**VAST BEYOND CONCEPT**.....**by Hal Remson**

What were the dark nebulae, the so-called "sink-holes" in space—masses so vast that even light was warped back? And had those four desperate earth-creatures at last found in them the one thousand million millionth fragment of the universe adapted to life as they knew it?

A SENSATIONAL ARTICLE

**ATLANTROPA—THE IMPROVED CONTINENT**.....**by Willy Ley**

A sensational scientific solution for land-grabbing, war-crazy Europe!

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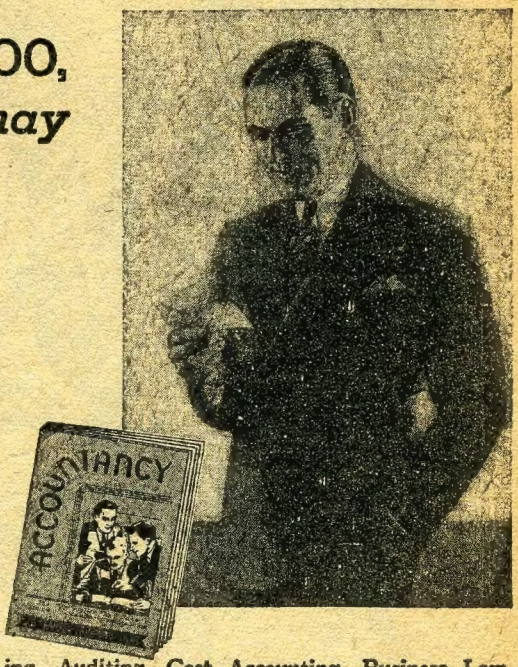


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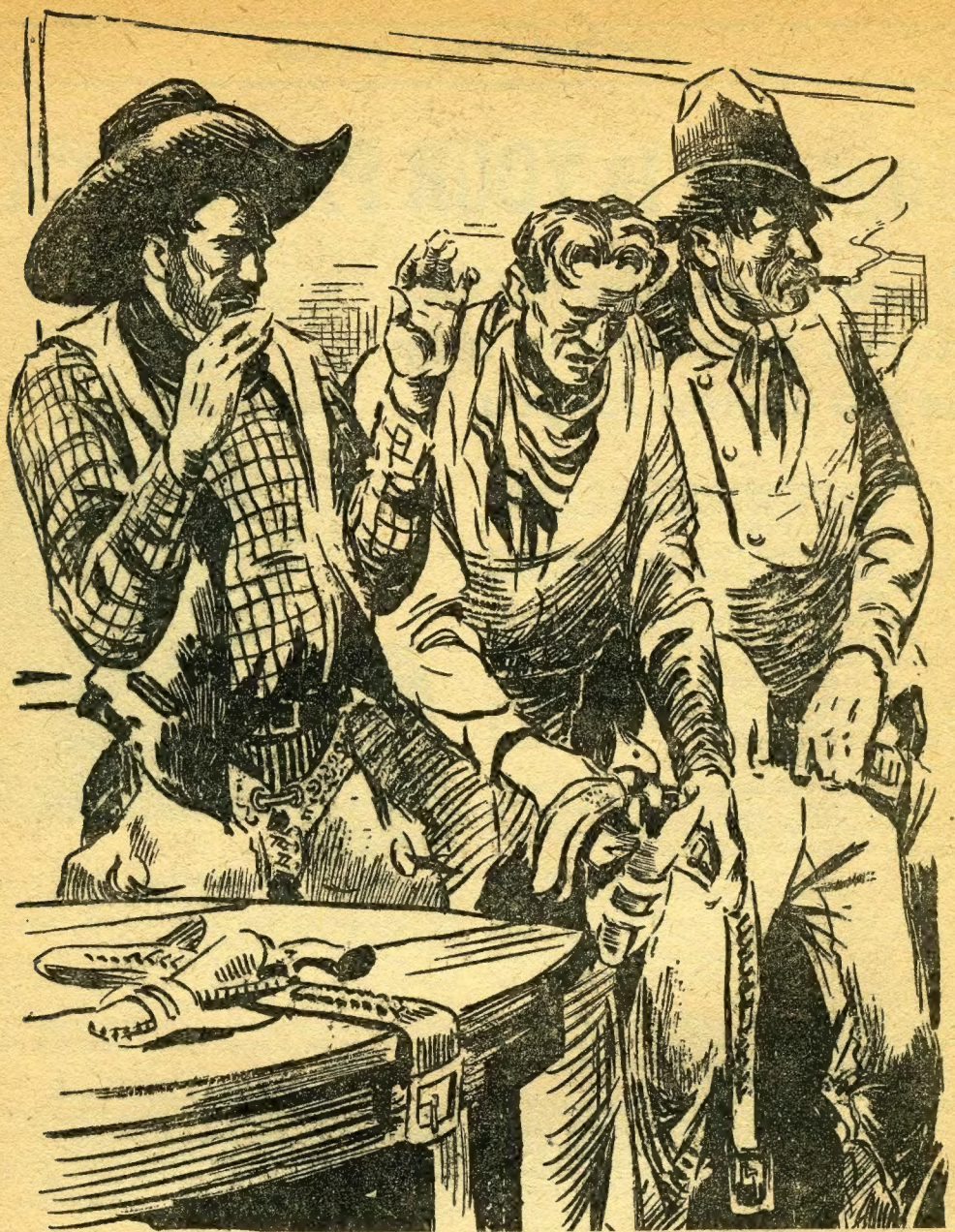


THRILLING SAGA OF A GUN-EXILE'S COLT REPRIEVE!

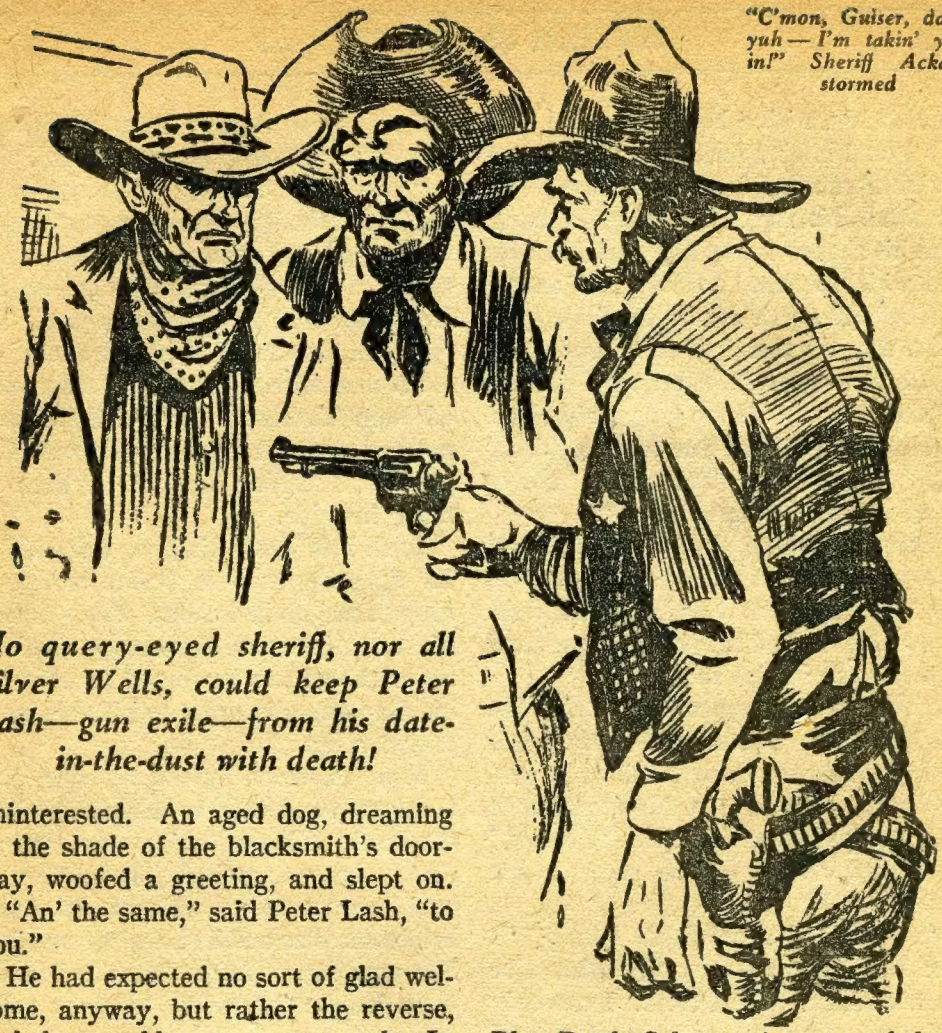
# *Gunhawk, Count Your Bullets!*

## By L. L. FOREMAN

PETER LASH reined his weary old sorrel aside to a hitching post, and dismounted. With distant, cynical concern, he played his deepset eyes over the main street of Silver Wells, the while he worked the stiffness out of his long legs.

"Home!" he murmured, and spat into the dust, his opinion of it.

Silver Wells, not yet aware of an outcast's return, slumbered on in the afternoon's heat. The main street remained



*"C'mon, Guiser, dang yuh — I'm takin' yuh in!" Sheriff Ackard stormed*

***No query-eyed sheriff, nor all Silver Wells, could keep Peter Lash—gun exile—from his date-in-the-dust with death!***

uninterested. An aged dog, dreaming in the shade of the blacksmith's doorway, woofed a greeting, and slept on.

"An' the same," said Peter Lash, "to you."

He had expected no sort of glad welcome, anyway, but rather the reverse, and that would come soon enough. In about a minute this town was due to wake up with a jerk. The thought was, in its way, grimly amusing to Peter Lash. He had visualized this scene, and the ones to follow, a thousand times in the past five years.

His slow, regarding gaze traveled to the square front of the only brick building in town: The Silver Wells Bank. He paced that way, his thread light on the warped boardwalk. He saw, across the street, a figure come to the open door of the sheriff's office and stand to watch him. But the sun was in the sheriff's squinting eyes, and he couldn't see any too well at best.

Peter Lash turned into the bank's entrance, putting the sheriff out of his mind. There were saddled horses drooping at the hitchrack outside the Blue Bottle Saloon. Any one of them would be better than the weary old sorrel to ride out on in a hurry—if he was able to ride. No query-eyed sheriff was going to side-track him from what he had come to do. Nor all Silver Wells, if it came to that. This thing was predestined, cut and dried, burned into a thousand bitter vows.

The lone cashier in his cage sent an upward look over his spectacles at Peter Lash, an impersonal look that changed to flustered annoyance when Lash ignored him and stepped to the door marked—R. Thoreson, Private.

"Here—here!" The cashier rapped on his wire cage. "You can't go in there! That's Mr. Thoreson's private office."

"He's expectin' me," said Lash.

He entered the office, shut the door

behind him with a heel, and stood with his broad back against it. His stained old sombrero had been pulled well down to shade his face. He cuffed it back, and his shaggy russet hair tumbled over his wide forehead to form an unruly cowl above a pair of startling blue eyes. Now that the time had come, an icy deliberation replaced the heat and passion that had simmered too long within him.

He said gently, "You *were* expectin' me, weren't you, Thoreson? Never mind the gun in that drawer!"

Ram Thoreson, blunt of face and heavy of frame, let his steady eyes rest for an instant on Lash's poised right hand. He nodded his graying head, and leaned back in his chair.

"Yes—I was expecting you." He studied Lash across the desk. His weight made the chair creak as he settled in it. Age was in his face, but it had barely touched his eyes. "I know," he added, "what you've come to do. But first—"

"I wish," cut in Lash slowly, "I could make you go through what I've been through. But I can't. I can only kill you—I've got to content myself with that!"

"Would that content you, Lash?" Ram Thoreson picked a pipe from his desk, and knocked out its cold ashes. "I doubt if murder can content any man—any man with decency in him, that is."

"There's no decency in me," said Lash. "Not now." To himself that was a statement of plain fact, and he believed it.

AGAIN Ram Thoreson studied him, studied the hard set of the grim, curiously pale face, the cynical glint in the startling eyes. "Well—maybe so," he admitted. "Smoke?"

Lash didn't look at the tobacco jar. "I lost the habit," he remarked. "I lost several habits, good an' bad. An' I picked up a few—mostly bad."

Sudden impatience, born of old anger, broke through his icy control.

"Don't try to stall, Thoreson!" he rasped. His deep, slow tone took on a cutting edge. "No need to load that pipe. You'll never live to smoke it! Reach for that drawer, damn you! I'll give you time to get that gun out!"

"A man without decency," commented Ram Thoreson, "would shoot, and not bother about a gun in a drawer. It's you that's stalling, Lash." He went on filling his pipe.

Lash half drew his gun, and held it for dragging seconds before letting it drop back into its holster. The moment of frustration made him savage. He had never thought to be forced to whip up his deep anger in order to kill this man, armed or not.

Ram Thoreson lighted his pipe, and the flame was steady as he sucked it into the bowl. His meditating eyes showed that he knew to an inch just how far he could expect to go with his unarmed helplessness as a shield against murder. Not very far, perhaps. Lash had never been known for gentle ways or mild temper.

The banker spoke again. "What I did to you, Lash, was something I knew you'd kill me for, some day. I took five years of your life—"

"You did more than that," broke in Lash harshly. "You put scars in me that'll never heal. Any man can point after me, an' say—'There goes a jailbird!' Me! You dirty, low-down, lyin'—!"

He cut the air with his hand, and at the end of the arc his palm struck his gunbutt. Words—words—he had lived with whispering words for five years, five centuries, making them suffice until he reached the apex of this moment. This was no time for more of them.

"I'm sorry," said Thoreson. Regret, feigned or real, was in his heavy voice. "I grant your right to kill me. But first

I want to say something. No, I'm not going to offer you money. It might work with most men, but I'm not fooling myself about you. You're ready to kill me—and swing for it, of course, or get shot down trying to get away. Right?"

He looked at Lash's hand, the fingers tight around the butt of the holstered gun, and got his answer from that.

"I want to make a bargain with you, Lash," he went on. "I want one more day to live. Let me have that one day, and tomorrow night I'll ride out onto the range with you, where you can kill me and get clear away. Lash, I'm offering you a whole lifetime—for one day of mine!"

Lash drew his gun out all the way. "Is life so good to you that you'd scheme and stall to gain one more day of it?" he sneered. "I haven't found it so! If I let you live, in an hour I'd be dead or in jail!"

Thoreson shook his grayed head. "No, Lash," he returned quickly. "I wouldn't cheat you again. I've known that this time would come. I know what I owe you. I'm ready to pay. But I must have that one more day."

"Why?" Peter Lash flung the query at him.

"My daughter," said Ram Thoreson, "is getting married tomorrow."

"Liar!" snapped Lash briefly. "You haven't got a daughter. A wife, yes, but—"

"You're wrong," Thoreson interrupted with his quiet, heavy voice. "I've got a daughter. I suppose you don't remember her. She wasn't much more than a child when you left, and was away at school most of the time. And I haven't a wife. She died last year. She was an invalid, you know. Yes, my girl is getting married tomorrow. They'll leave for a California honeymoon right away. After she's gone, you can have my life—and your own, too."

THROUGH Lash's brittle mood entered a savagely reluctant feeling that this was genuine, and no transparent trick. He thrust it away. Thoreson was just a good actor, with his queerly honest eyes, patient tone, calmly fatalistic manner. The man was gambling for his life and putting up a desperately convincing bluff.

Lash made a motion with his filled right hand. "I'm counting to five," he growled. "Then I shoot! You can grab for that gun in the drawer or not, just as you like!"

"But—Lash—listen—!" Thoreson started up from his chair.

"One!" intoned Lash. "I've lived for this minute, Thoreson! Two! You'll not cheat me of it. Three! I'll laugh as they hang me, remembering the look on your face right now! Four! Better grab for that gun, Thoreson—because—I'm—goin'—to—"

A sound at the back made him whirl. The door was swinging open. He found himself centering the gun on a girl, who stopped short as she entered, her startled eyes on him and his naked weapon. Seconds passed while they stared at each other. Lash got a vivid impression of clear gray-blue eyes, rounded slimness, and deep amber hair coiled in thick braids around a well-shaped head. The lips, full and firm, were parted a little.

The voice of Ram Thoreson broke in, casually jocular and controlled. "It's all right, Inga. Mr. Lash isn't accustomed to having doors open behind him without warning."

"Evidently!" observed the girl, a little breathlessly.

She stepped around Lash, somewhat carefully, as though half under the impression that he might reach out one of his long arms and grab hold of her. There was a rough, untamed look about him that gave root to the impression, and his wide-set eyes followed her with

a steady regard that was disturbing.

Lash turned with her passing, and knew that she was watching him from the corners of her eyes. Only when she paused at the desk and spoke again to Thoreson, did he remember the gun in his hand. He holstered it, and was irritated to find that his ears were warm. There was a let-down in his violent mood, and the aftermath left him with a residue of queer and mingled emotions.

The girl had said something, a few words in a low voice that Lash didn't catch. Thoreson smiled, nodded, and pushed a sheaf of bills across his desk. The girl picked up the money, gave an answering nod and smile, and Lash had another full look at her face as she turned.

It struck him that here was a youthful face whose beauty was founded on a quiet strength of character. And yet there was something missing from it, and he, with a bitter seasoning that gave him insight, knew what it was. The healthy young gayety that should have been there was gone. In its place was a forced mask, a substitute to cover up the loss.

The stray thought occurred to him as she turned away from the desk. She had been smiling, and the smile lingered as she left Thoreson, but its bright radiance was counterfeit. Lash recognized that kind of smile. He, too, had often used such a smile to fool others and sometimes himself. He had seen such false smiles on men as they walked jauntily to the gallows and eternity.

Then she had passed him, with another sidelong, questioning glance, and the door closed behind her. He had an idea that even that counterfeit smile faded with the closing of the door.

"Weddings," remarked Ram Thoreson, "cost money. It ought to be a good one."

The remark hardly registered in Lash's mind. He asked a curt question. "Who is she?"

Thoreson leaned back again in his chair. "My daughter."

A series of thoughts came to Lash, and formed a pattern. Five years of enforced introspection had given his brain a sharp, rapid quality. He said, flatly, "You're selling her!"

It was as though he had flung an accusation that was expected, yet had remained unvoiced up until now by all but him. Thoreson reddened, half rose from his chair. "That's a lie!" he rapped, and his vehemence betrayed the depth of his sting. "She's marrying Clee Jordle because she loves him—I've got nothing to do with it!"

Lash caught at the name. "Clee Jordle?" he echoed. "Son of Harge Jordle? So you're marrying her off to him—son of the man who owns you like he owns most everything else in this Red River country!"

"Harge Jordle doesn't own me!" Thoreson's fists were clenched. "I broke off with him when—"

"You're selling her!" Lash said again. "Selling your own daughter to save your skin—just as you sold me!"

"I'm not! She says she loves him." Thoreson grew suddenly calm. "She told me so. She's marrying him tomorrow. Lash, I'm asking you once more to hold off for one day."

A VOICE within Lash called him a weak fool for listening, for believing. For five soul-cramping years he had plotted for this day, for this hour of vengeance on the man who had deliberately wrecked him. And now. . . .

"Tomorrow night, Thoreson," he said slowly, "I kill you! Till then, I'll be watchin' you. Make one slip, one little sidestep—!"

"I won't," promised Thoreson, and sank back into his chair. "I give you my oath, Lash. And—thanks."

Lash, with his hand on the doorknob, looked back. "Thank your daughter," he said curtly, and left.

Lash knew he had walked into trouble as soon as he walked into the Blue Bottle Saloon. It had a sizeable crowd for this time of day. The name of the proprietor was in small, neat gilt above the batwing doors: Harge Jordle. Lash wondered if there was anything worthwhile left in Silver Wells that Harge Jordle had not added to his possessions. He wondered, too, how big the Jordle Trey Diamond outfit had grown by this time.

Plenty big, probably. Jordle was not the kind of man to be satisfied with half a loaf. As far back as five years ago he had been steadily expanding, pushing out the little fellows and adding their holdings to the vast Trey Diamond range.

Lash let the batwing doors flap shut behind him and looked around, though he had no hope of finding Harge Jordle here. The great Harge Jordle seldom left his big stone house on the Trey Diamond, where he lived like a baron, with Chinese servants and such-like fripperies. His son, Clee, attended efficiently to all business details.

Men glanced up from tables and bar at Lash's entrance, scanned him first with casual interest, then with sharp and hard intentness. Somebody muttered an oath. A man rose swiftly from his feet, stood undecided, and slowly settled back again.

Lash knew that he was recognized. He could sense the rapid gathering of hate that greeted him. Most of these men were small ranchers. They had been caught in the pinch of the bank's temporary suspension, five years ago. Some of them had likely lost their shirts during that financial catastrophe. It was ironic that they who had waged a hopeless fight against Jordle for years, should be forced to buy their drinks over Jordle's bar, trade in Jordle's general store, and use a bank run by a man owned by Jordle.

He dropped a silver dollar on the bar, pointed a finger at a bottle, and was coldly amused to find he had plenty of room around him. Men drifted away from his near vicinity with a studied deliberation that was the next thing to open insult.

A whisper, purposely loud enough to cut across the oppressive silence, reached him. "Jailbird!"

There it was—the first taunt. Five years of payment were not enough to clean the slate for the man found guilty of robbing Thoreson's bank and bringing ruin to the small, struggling ranchers of the Red River range. Lash pivoted slowly, his eyes seeking the whisperer.

Behind him, he heard another whisperer, low and cautious this time. It came from the bartender, plumping the bottle and glass down, and noisily making change.

"Hold it, Lash! See Jordle. He wants yuh."

A queer sort of message. Lash pondered on it, without giving sign that he had heard it. He faced the bar again, picked up his drink, deciding to down it and get out before some fool tried him too far. These Red River cowmen had been living on the brink of violence for years. It wouldn't take much to start a flare-up.

He speculated on what sort of reception he might get if he told them Ram Thoreson had robbed his own bank, probably with the full knowledge and connivance of Harge Jordle. The thought was almost funny. He could picture their incredulous sneers, their scornful hoots. They were so sure of themselves, so confidently certain that they had sent the right man to prison. They had tried to take him out of the jail to lynch him, before the trial.

There had been open threats of beating him to make him confess where he had hidden the loot.

THE bartender waddled his fat bulk along to the other end of the bar, and dropped the silver dollar into the till with a plunk. Somebody said, clearly and distinctly, "Plenty more where thet come from!"

Lash lifted his head and gazed at the speaker. He recognized the man as Ty Chaffee, who made more money from cards than out of his few scrub cows. With no range of his own, nor ambition to acquire any, he could talk longer and louder about range grievances than any land-owning cowman on Red River.

A jet of temper erupted in Lash. "Was that remark," he asked, "meant for me, Chaffee?"

Ty Chaffee sent sidelong looks at the party of men he was drinking with, got evidence of support from their faces, and moved slightly away from the bar. He had something of a reputation as a quick hand with a gun, and wore one low, its holster built into his flaring leather chaps.

He pursed thick lips. "Well now, I don't 'member usin' yore name," he drawled. "Fact is, I doubt if anybody here's in the habit o' speakin' it. But if yuh got good ears, yuh likely heard somebody mention yuh a minute ago."

Lash held his rising temper in check, but a stormy anger at these condemning, self-appointed wielders of the law strained at his control. There had always been in him a hatred for insinuation, intolerance, oblique words.

"That dollar," he said, "was earned. I worked with a horse outfit up-state for two months before comin' on down here. I earned sixty dollars. Twenty went for a nag, five for an old saddle, an' a few dollars went for other things along the way. I've got less'n ten dollars. Outside that, I got nothin'. *Nothin'* — sabe? Now, have you or anybody else got somethin' to say to that?"

His forced mildness was disarming. Holding his temper down made his eyes deceptively quiet. He stood with his tall, shabby figure relaxed, one elbow resting on the bar, the right arm hanging loose at his side.

Ty Chayee looked long and took good stock before replying. He began to grin, and the grin was laced with a knowing sneer. "Nobody ain't sayin' a thing." His grin broadened. "But I reckin' we're all tryin' to figger out how a jailbird could spend fourteen thousand dollars in prison!"

Lash's temper exploded within him, but showed only in the sudden brightness of his eyes. He still stood relaxed.

He said softly—"I'm waitin', Chaffee!" — and his meaning was clear enough to bring instant hush to the barroom. For him, all preliminaries were past. He had always been like that, blunt and sudden, cutting straight to the core of the matter. It had earned him, in the past, the reputation of a trouble-seeker. The reputation, pinned on him by milder men, was incorrect, but it had stuck.

Chaffee, caught up short, gave a start and then grew very still. His mental processes were reflected on his red, fleshy face. He had not been quite ready for such an abrupt showdown. It had seemed fairly safe, with a dozen friends around him, to make a minor hero of himself by throwing a few oblique insults at the Silver Wells outcast. And now, unexpectedly, the offensive was whisked out of his hands and turned against him.

Belligerency fought with alarm, and partly conquered it. He shifted, took a stance, and thrust his big head forward. Men about him stepped with pensive care out of the line of fire. Their actions sealed the coming clash.

made it final. Chaffee's chest heaved with a deep breath. His gaze sought in Lash's eyes some sign of bluff.

There was none. Lash spoke again, quietly, conversationally. "I'm still waitin', Chaffee! You can take back that remark—or go all the way!"

Chaffee's eyes wandered. He stared at Lash's right hand, at the chipped old gunbutt in its plain hand-made holster. The beginning of a sigh went up from the crowd as he started to turn away.

It was a false move, designed to gain a notch of advantage. He struck fast for his built-in holster as he swung away, the act shielded by his body. His gun came out, slick and smooth, and he took a quick side-step as he slashed it around.

Lash made his move. He was not fast to the eye, and his draw was not spectacular. Like his thinking, it was stripped down to bare essentials. His hand went through the motion without visible haste or halt, and his gun spat its livid flash as Chaffee fired.

THE thudding roar of the double blast made bottles and glasses ring on the back bar shelf. Lash's sombrero slid back over his head and fell. He caught it behind him with his left hand, and put it on again. Futile as an echo, a dropped gun banged on the floor. Through thin smoke, Lash gazed at Chaffee, at the rigid crowd of cowmen, and waited for whatever next might break.

Chaffee, uttering short gasps of pain, rocked back and forth, clutching a bullet-scored arm to his middle. The bullet had ripped him from wrist to elbow, and made another furrow in his side. Sight of his own blood made him look sick and shaken.

The batwing doors flew open. Sheriff Ackard, a dried-up little man with squinting eyes and tobacco-stained mustache, came stamping into the barroom with the stride of a man twice as big. Despite his faulty sight he refused to wear glasses, regarding them as somehow not in keeping with the dignity of a lawman. As usual, he got things mixed.

"Drunk agin', huh?" he blared at the first man he bumped into, and grabbed him by the shirt. "Drunk an' shootin' off yore iron jest to hear it pop! Dangerin' folks' lives! C'mon, Guiser, dang yuh—I'm takin' yuh in!"

"Leggo me!" His prisoner twisted free. "Yuh wool-haided ol' coot! In the fust place, I ain't lucky 'nough to be drunk. Secon' place, I ain't Guiser. An' 'twasn't me shot, anyway. This shootin' warn't no foolishness. Ask Chaffee!"

Sheriff Ackard did so. He looked vaguely in the wrong direction and asked Chaffee what in hell he meant by shooting somebody. By the time they got the sheriff straight in his facts, Chaffee was being helped down the street to Doc Hant's office. Several men talked at once.

"Lash?" Ackard peered about him. "Did yuh say Peter Lash? Where's he gone?"

"Not gone," said Lash. "Right here, Sheriff. Would you be wantin' me?"

Ackard snorted. "Durn right! Git on over to my office." He made no attempt to pull his gun, nor to take Lash's weapon, but he nevertheless put on a brave show of authority.

Lash went, deciding that was as good a way out of this spot as any other. He could handle the sheriff. He couldn't handle a crowd of hate-embittered cowmen if they took a notion to blow up.

Sheriff Ackard followed Lash into his pineboard office across the way, and closed the door behind him. "Yuh crazy damn fool!" he exploded. "What in heck did yuh come back here for? An' why—why in the name o' seven blazin' kites—did yuh hafta—"

"Never mind the rest, Sheriff." Lash sat himself on the rickety table that served duty as a desk. "I gunned Chaffee because he talked too much. I let him draw first—even that mob'll admit that. But that's not what I came back for."

"What *did* yuh come back for, then?" queried the sheriff.

"You'll know," said Lash shortly, "tomorrow night."

"So?" Ackard thoughtfully and inaccurately spat at a crack in the floor. He was no fool, contrary to general opinion. "I reckin 'twas yuh I saw go in the bank awhile ago. Talked to Thoreson, didn't yuh? H'm. An' I hear Harge Jordle passed word he wants to see yuh, should yuh come back here. Gonna see him?"

"Mebby so. Haven't thought about it. Why?"

"H'm." Ackard gave his little cough. "Y'know, Lash, I never was right satisfied 'bout thet trial. An' things happened later thet made me wonder a bit more. O' course, I kinda stay neutral, far's I can."

"Sure," Lash nodded. Charitable feeling kept him from making ironic comment. The sheriff's neutrality was not based on choice, but on his unimportance. A rather pathetic figure, old Ackard. Fumbling, well-meaning, and with no more real power than a stray dog. He was a joke, a handy substitute, forever trying to please everybody.

"I suppose," said Lash, "Harge Jordle an' his mob just about rule the roost here now, eh?"

Ackard coughed again. He had a lot of respect for Jordle and the Trey Diamond riders. They kept him in office, despite the fact that he belonged to the small rancher faction. He had never quite brought himself to accepting the known fact that his futile ineffectiveness just suited Jordle.

"We-ell, sort of," he admitted. "The little fellers are always kickin', claimin' they're gettin' raw deals an' gettin' pushed out, so forth. Never any evidence I can use, though. It's the same feud it always was. Jordle never interferes with me, though," he added hastily. "He knows he couldn't monkey with the law."

"Wise hombre," Lash agreed drily.

"If it wasn't for Thoreson," the sheriff went on, "I reckin Jordle'd own this hull Red River range by now. Thoreson's done a lot for the little fellers, an they all swear by him. He—"

"What?" Lash sat bolt upright "Thoreson? Help the little fellers? You're crazy! Thoreson an' Jordle work together!"

ACKARD shook his head. "You're wrong, Lash. It did kinda look thet way once, but not any more. They hate each other, fight each other ev'ry turn. Thoreson has loaned plenty money to the little fellers, an' helped 'em through when it looked dead certain Jordle had 'em in his fist. They scrimp an' save an' sweat blood to pay it back, too. They know thet bank's their only salvation, an' they can always call on it in a pinch."

Lash passed a hand bewilderedly over his turbulent hair. "But, listen," he argued. "Jordle helped Thoreson start that bank. He loaned Thoreson money to start it, after Thoreson sold out his ranch. Heck, man, he owns Thoreson! Clee Jordle is marryin' Thoreson's daughter tomorrow!"

"I know," Ackard nodded. "Ain't nobody understands 'bout thet. Took ever'body all of a heap, it did, when folks heard. It's kinda queer. But to git back to what I was goin' to say. Lash, I knew yore old man. He was a kinda wildy, too, like yuh, but straight as a string. An' he was a small-time cowman, jest like yuh was, till—er—"

"Till Thoreson an' a framed trial wiped me out," Lash finished for him. "Yeah. What of it?" He had not thought of his dead father for some time.

"I'm a cowman, too," stated Ackard. "I still got my little place. I ain't foolin' myself 'bout what would happen 'round here if somethin' happened to Thoreson. Jordle'd run this country his own way. He'd squeeze out all the little fellers, buy up their notes, force auction on their stock, an' ruin 'em. They—"

"D'you know any reason," Lash queried, "why somethin' should happen to Thoreson?"

"They got mighty close to ruin," pursued the sheriff, "the time the bank was robbed an' had to shut down. Thoreson managed to save 'em jest in time, the next winter. But—"

"Why," Lash asked again, "should somethin' happen to Thoreson?"

"We-ell, it's jest a notion," Ackard hedged. "Yore plenty sore at him, likely, fer goin' witness against yuh in the trial. Sometimes a feller gits so sore, he—"

"Listen, Ackard," Lash cut in on him again. "If you had fourteen thousand dollars cached away, would you take a chance on killin' the man who caused you to be sent up for stealin' it?"

"M-mm—reckin not." The sheriff looked uneasy, knowing he had been led into a trap.

"An' yet," said Lash, "you've as good as asked me not to kill Thoreson. Ackard, that's as good as admittin' you suspect I haven't got that fourteen thousand dollars—that I never had it—that I never robbed that bank!"

Ackard swallowed, gave him a scared look, and muttered three words. "Go see Jordle!"

The square stone ranch house of the Trey Diamond bulked large against the evening sky. The sun, setting behind it, made its face seem black, and painted its gray side-walls with reddish tinge. Lash was reminded of the living tomb that had held him for five years, and had no liking for it. It occurred to him that this prison-like pile was a heck of a place to bring a young bride. That girl's forced smile wouldn't gain any genuine radiance here.

Riding across the great bare yard, Lash speculated as to just why Jordle should want to see him. Jordle had a faculty for turning all things to his own advantage.

Queer, to think of Thoreson as the champion of the under-dogs, helping the little ranchers of Red River in their struggle against Harge Jordle. A trick in that, somewhere. It didn't make sense. And with Inga Thoreson preparing to marry Clee Jordle, the thing made even less sense.

"Pull up right where yo're at, feller!"

The curt command jerked up his attention before he reached the stone house. He tightened rein. The old sorrel nag at once went loose in all its joints, and promptly fell into a doze.

Three men cast long shadows as they came around a corner of the house. Two more sauntered into view around the other corner. From the door of the long bunkhouse, off to one side and slightly to the rear, appeared more men, strolling lazily forward without swinging their arms. Lash took note that they all wore their gunbelts and filled holsters. The place reminded him again of that other place he had known. It was well enough guarded.

HE slid his foot out of the right stirrup, preparing to dismount. Even that slight movement caused the oncoming figures to halt and stand motionless, their hands merged with the poking shapes of their gunbelts.

"If y'got no objections," Lash remarked, "I'd like to get off Fleet-foot,

here, 'fore he falls down an' goes to sleep. He does that, odd times, an' it's right embarrassin'."

One figure stepped away from the rest and came forward, a lean-bodied man with a peculiar grace of movement that bespoke the gunman, rather than the cowhand. A pair of expressionless eyes and a low-slung gun confirmed the impression.

"Who are yuh an' what d'ya want?"

"I'm Lash, an' I want—"

He did not have to finish. A toneless voice from the upper balcony of the house interrupted him. "It's all right, Naal. Let him come in."

Lash dismounted, tugged at the reins. The sorrel heaved a sigh, gathered its bones into place, and plodded forward. Naal stepped aside to let him pass, and followed behind. A light touch at his holster made Lash whirl. He stared into Naal's face, inches from his own.

Naal twitched his upper lip in the ghost of a grin. "Take it easy, Lash!" he purred. "Nobody wears a gun when he goes in to see the boss. It ain't polite."

Lash let him take the gun, acutely aware that the watching guards had drawn theirs. He dropped the sorrel's reins and trod the short flight of steps onto the shadowy front porch. The front door hung wide open. A Chinese servant in black silk and tasseled skullcap motioned from the doorway and withdrew into the inner gloom.

Lash followed. He had never been inside this house before, and had seen Harge Jordle only once, and then at a distance. The house was even bigger than it looked from the outside, and furnished with the severity of a church. Yet the very plainness had a rich note of opulence. The high-backed chairs, straight and uncomfortable looking, and ranged with meticulous uniformity along the walls, were of carved and polished oak. A long refectory table, at the far end of the entrance hall, looked like a coffin in the dim light that seeped through the narrow stained-glass windows.

The oppressiveness got into Lash. Such silent austerity reminded him too forcibly of cramping restraint, iron rules, maddening monotony. Passing a black-framed mirror hung on a wall, he instinctively dodged before he recognized his own reflection, then scowled at it. Be-damned to the place—it was getting on his nerves. He fingered his empty holster, and wished there were a few decent lights to see by.

The Chinaman softly opened a door and stood back. Lash went through, and the door closed behind him with the same softness. He was in a long room with windows set too high to see through, and it was just as gloomy dark as in the hall.

"Sit down, Lash," said the same voice that had called from the balcony.

Lash looked around for the owner of it, but the murky dusk was too tricky to distinguish anything.

"Where?" he asked bluntly. "On the floor?"

"There's a chair on your right against the wall," came the reply, and to Lash there seemed to be a tinge of mocking amusement in the tone.

He found the chair, sat in it, squirmed in it, and stood up again. "More solid comfort in a busted saddle," he grunted.

Impatience took hold of him. "What about a light?" he suggested.

A clap of hands sounded. Almost immediately Lash heard the tiny click of the opening door.

"Lights, Wang."

A sputter, and a lighted taper went drifting past Lash, with the Chinaman's parchment face under it, like a disembodied spirit guiding a pagan flame. The taper paused at points along the wall, leaving other little flames behind.

The flames rose from wicks floating in oil, in what appeared to be blue cut-glass bowls set into alcoves. The light they gave out brought to Lash's mind a picture of the funeral parlor, the night before they buried his father.

HIS disgust deepened when he began to smell a heavy scent. There was some kind of incense in the oil. But he could at least see something of his surroundings now. When the Chinaman got around to the other side of the room, the voice stopped him.

"That will do, Wang."

Wang padded out. Lash could barely see the owner of the voice now. As his eyes grew more accustomed to the faint blue light, he could see him better, enough to make sure it was Harge Jordle. No other man in Red River would dress like that; black evening suit and starched white shirt-front.

"Is that better, Lash?" asked Jordle politely.

"Some," Lash admitted with reservations. He would have chosen stronger light, so as to get a good look at the man.

Nobody, as far as he knew, had ever got intimate enough with Harge Jordle to be able to describe him. He spent his life in this house, issued his orders from it, and seldom left it. Whenever he did leave, he went accompanied by a squad of his tight-mouthed riders, and paused to speak to nobody, nor even to return greetings. The one time Lash had seen him, it had struck him that Jordle had been sunk in deep, unseeing meditation, noticing nothing about him.

"You wanted to see me, Jordle," said Lash abruptly.

The blur of Jordle's face moved in a nod. "I wanted to talk to you."

He sat in a huge chair with high back and arms, his feet resting on a footstool. His face and hair looked equally gray, the dividing line not visible in the dim light. The only feature about his face that Lash could distinguish with any definiteness was the eyes. They were blank, opaque, and shone like dull metal.

"I wanted to talk to you about Thoreson," said Jordle. "You came back to kill him, of course. I knew you would. I want you to hold that up until I give the word."

His cold matter-of-factness was amazing. No less amazing was his calm assumption that Lash would do as he commanded. His voice was deliberate, toneless.

Lash stared across the room at the gray, bloodless face. It looked ghastly in the blue light, like the face of a corpse, with silver coins for eyes. He asked harshly, "Why?"

A pause came before Jordle answered. "There are certain things to be done, before Thoreson is killed," he said. "My son, Clee, wants Inga Thoreson for his wife. He shall have her. I want my son to be complete master of this Red River country. That shall be done, too. Thoreson and his bank stand in the way. He holds the notes of practically every small rancher in this section. After he sells me those notes, you may have him!"

"An' when," asked Lash, "will that be?"

"Very shortly after the wedding," replied Jordle. "Thoreson managed to trick me once. This time he'll have no chance! I lent him money to help start that bank. I tied strings to the loan. At any time I could have called for full payment, and ruined him. He had a sick wife and a daughter to take care of. I forced him to make certain loans."

"Trick mortgages," Lash nodded. "I lost my spread on one. We trusted Thoreson. Gave us quite a jolt when the bank began foreclosin' on those mortgages before we knew the time-

limit was up."

"You will be amply reimbursed for your loss," promised Jordle. "Yes, Thoreson held those mortgages—and I held Thoreson! In another year I would have had everything in my hand—in my hand!"

His right arm lifted. Lash saw the white hand, long fingers spread and slowly closing. He radiated power, egotism, the will to rule and possess.

"And then came the robbery." The hand dropped. "Like everyone else, I thought you did it. I was grateful to you, Lash! It helped me. When the bank was forced to close, it hit the small cowmen. Thoreson took a trip north. I had only to wait."

"But,"—a rasp came to the even voice—"suddenly Thoreson was back, the bank was open again, and he announced an extended time-limit on all mortgages! I sent for him. He sent a lawyer to me. The lawyer brought money to pay off my loan to Thoreson. I had to take it—had to give up my hold over Thoreson! Lash, do you know why I am telling you this?"

Lash drew a long breath. "Maybe," he said, "I do."

"Yes, I think you do, Lash." Jordle's eyes glimmered across the dim-lit room. "Can you guess where Thoreson got that money?"

"It was depositors' money," said Lash. "Money I was found guilty of stealing! It's no news to me that Thoreson robbed his own bank. I had five years to figger that out. But I don't see how it could be proved—nor how you'll make him give up those mortgages he's holding."

"No?" Jordle's laugh was hardly audible. "Lash, tell me what happened that night. I want to check up."

LASH didn't care to conjure up the memory, but he did it. "I'd been drinking in the Blue Bottle," he said, "an' thinking about having to lose my spread. I reckon I drank too much. Everybody knew I was hard-pressed. Somebody asked me what I aimed to do. I said, meaning nothing, that I'd have to get hold of some cash, an' I walked out."

He went on. "I sat down on some steps in the alley, an' tried to figger. It was the back of the bank, but I never noticed. I fell asleep there. Somebody tripped over me in the dark, coming quiet out of that door. I woke an' started up. There was a feller with a gun. He hit me on the head with the barrel an' knocked me down. My gun slid out of my holster. I grabbed around for it an' cut my knuckles on something. It was a rock, so I let fly with that."

Speaking of it brought back to Lash a vision of the courtroom scene, the incredulous sneers that had received his telling of the same story.

"The rock got the feller on the jaw. It was Thoreson, o' course, though I didn't know. I heard his teeth click, an' he went down without another sound. Next I knew, I was ridin' home, an' talkin' to myself. I was dazed, didn't know what I was doin', an' my head ached like fury. Seems two-three fellers saw me ridin' out of town, hours after I'd left the Blue Bottle, so when Thoreson was found lyin' in the alley it wasn't hard to guess who knocked him out. They came an' arrested me that next mornin'—for bank robbery!"

"They had a good case," Jordle pointed out, and the cold amusement was again in his level tone. "Thoreson, of course, had already taken the money and hidden it. He was coming back to set the scene and make it look like a robbery, when you cropped up in his plans. So he used you as a convenient scapegoat."

"Yeah." It matched Lash's reasoning. "He claimed he saw me prowlin'

at the back door, an' that I fought him down, took his keys, an' looted the bank. Had all kinds of evidence to back up his story, too. There was my hat an' gun lyin' in the alley—the gash on my head—the remark I'd passed in the Blue Bottle about having to get some cash somewhere — everything! An' I hadn't a scrap of proof against him."

"But *I* have, Lash!" Jordle leaned forward in his huge chair. "I've got evidence that would clear you and send Thoreson to prison for embezzlement and perjury! He was wise. The money he paid me was not the same money that was stolen. He had changed it. It took time and patience to find out he had changed the bills in a northern bank. And the numbers were not known. They had to be traced back and forth through a hundred different channels."

"A lot o' work," commented Lash.

"And expensive," agreed Jordle. "I hired investigators. They gradually traced those bills, got sworn affidavits from all who had handled them, and finally completed the whole web. We can prove in any court of law that every bill of that fourteen thousand dollars passed through Thoreson's hands—*after it was stolen!*"

"Does Thoreson know?" Lash asked.

"He does," responded Jordle. "Clee told him two weeks ago, as soon as we had our evidence thoroughly completed. But Clee assured him he could persuade me not to use it. My son will be a great man some day, Lash. He has a fine brain. It was entirely his idea that he should marry Inga, and thus give us a double hold over Thoreson. Besides, he wants her. The girl could be made very unhappy in this house, if we—ah—choose to make her so! There are methods, you understand."

"Sure," said Lash. "I understand."

"You also understand, I hope, why you are to keep away from Thoreson until I say you may have him. In the meantime, my son will put you on the payroll."

"Yeah," said Lash. "I understand that, too."

REVULSION whipped through Lash. He felt unclean in this blue-lit room, and the sweet, heavy perfume of the burning incense sickened him. The face of Jordle looked like a grayish white blob suspended in the scented air.

Here, vengeance was not the sharp, incisive thing that he knew. Here it was a poison of slow brewing, prepared with cold-blooded skill and no emotion, and administered by hands that sought profit from it. The lethal blare of a gun or sweep of a knife, by contrast, was merciful and clean. Violence he could understand and accept, but not this passionless brand of icy venom.

"I reckon," said Lash, "I'll be leavin'."

"You may go." Jordle's voice reached him as he found the door. "But don't try to leave this ranch. Naal has his orders."

Lash had half expected something like that. For a moment he was tempted to unload his mind, until he remembered his empty holster. He opened the door, and with its opening came sounds of two horses drawing up outside the house. The same kind of depressing blue lights gave illumination to the long hall. He stepped into the hall, closed the door, and stood there, giving himself time to think.

Two sets of footsteps foreshadowed the entrance of two figures through the front door. One, smallish and slim, he recognized at once as Inga Thoreson. The other, tall and stoop-shouldered he guessed was Clee Jordle. Both were dressed for riding, and looked as though they had been out for a canter in the cool evening air.

"Sit down and wait for me, Inga." Clee Jordle's voice and manner were possessive, and he had the flat authority of his father in his tone. "I want to see my father about something, then I'll take you home. Be moonlight soon. You'll enjoy that, I'm sure."

There was a strong hint of sarcasm in the last remark that rasped on Lash. For some reason he wanted to swear when the girl obediently took a seat in one of the straight-backed chairs. With her soft hair and fair skin, she was the only spot of color and warmth in the somber hall. He walked slowly forward, and met Clee Jordle coming toward the door of the big room.

Clee Jordle paused. He had long, narrow eyes of uncertain color, and they played over Lash with the same supercilious regard that might have been given a new servant of doubtful ability and background.

"Ah—you're the Lash fellow, aren't you?" he inquired, and brushed past. "Wait here in the hall. I'll probably want to talk to you."

Lash breathed hard through his nose, and his right toe itched. He heard the closing of the door, and walked on until he was abreast of the girl. Their eyes met, and he halted. Looking down at her, it seemed to him that she was very small and young, sitting there in the big high-backed chair. In her steady gaze he could read accusation, and a little shrinking fear.

He knew what she was thinking. She thought him a Jordle man, a hireling gunman, here to get his orders.

He had never learned the use of soft words to cover hard facts and blunt meanings. Speech, to him, was merely a means of expressing himself in the clearest and shortest way, and the deeper his feeling, the greater his economy of words.

He said, positively, "You're a fool!"

It brought her swiftly to her feet. "How dare you!"

Color flooded her face, and Lash was glad to see temper in her eyes. It betrayed a warm vibrance, an alive quality that could burst through that bright, false, unhappy smile. He had stung her, aroused fight in her, and that was all to the good.

"You're a fool," he enlarged on his remark, "to sacrifice yourself. It won't save your father. I know, an' I'm tellin' you! Take my word for it, you'll—"

"The word of a—a jailbird?" she flashed at him and at once bit her lip.

THE quick flare in Lash's eyes died. "So you've heard, eh?" He smiled with no humor. "Bad news travels fast. But we're talkin' about you, an' I'm tellin' you not to marry Clee Jordle."

"Why?"

"For one thing," he said simply, "you don't care for him."

"I do! I—I—"

"You can't say it." Lash shook his head. "Don't try. I know what they're doing to you. Your father's letting you sacrifice yourself to save him!"

"He's not!" Inga's eyes blazed. "He doesn't know. I told him—he thinks—" She stopped herself.

"I see." Lash nodded. "So it's all the Jordle's work, eh? D'you know the kind of hold they've got on your father?"

Inga Thoreson's furious gaze wavered. The spirit and fire receded. "No," she answered finally, low-voiced, no longer fighting against the truth. "I only know they have some—some terrible hold on him. I heard Clee say things, and then I saw the look in Dad's eyes. So when Clee—asked me to marry him—and said everything would be all right—"

"Yeah." Lash saved her the burden of finishing.

Sudden passion and wrath that he

did not pause to analyze leaped in him, and swept aside his dour calmness. It was as though this girl was walking steadily to the brink of a deep pit, while the world stood passively watching, and only he could block her path.

"Don't be a fool!" he rapped harshly. "You can't throw yourself away like that! You can't! Their promises mean nothing. You'll live in hell the rest of your life, in this cursed house. That white-faced old man—he isn't human! And his son's of the same dirty breed!"

In his vehemence he placed his hard brown hands on her shoulders, stared down into her face. His startling blue eyes flamed with the urgent force of his will. He had entirely forgotten where he was and all reason for caution.

"Don't you see, girl?" He shook her. "You weren't made for that! You were meant to live—to laugh—ride and sing in the sunshine! You were made for—for—"

There was no more he could find to say, nor could he have said it had there been more words in him. Under his gaze the girl's eyes were wide, filled with a strange fascination, like the clear eyes of a child day-dreaming. Logic and reason fled, leaving only an impulse and sudden knowledge.

Lash bent and kissed her, and knew it was the cardinal point of what he had been trying to say. She did not draw away, and her lips were softly firm against his.

The feeling of watching eyes penetrated Lash's consciousness. He raised his head sharply, and the spell was broken. Inga drew away from him with a little gasp. Instinct drew their joined gaze down the hall. The girl froze, and Lash's breathing grew long and deep.

The door of the big room was open, and the pale outlines of two faces marked the spot, like immobile masks hung against a background of still blue mist. The face of Harge Jordle loomed highest, and its chill calmness did not allow the slightest sign of disturbance to mark the aquiline features. The marble-like skin held no color, no life. The metallic eyes stared levelly, without shift or focus, looking at nothing. Lash realized with a tiny shock that Harge Jordle was blind. It explained much.

Clee Jordle's face, alike in its thin features to that of his father, was foreshortened by his stooping posture. He had his head thrust forward listening. It gave exaggerated length to his sharp nose, and his narrow lips were drawn down at the corners. A trick of the light accented the lines of his ears into upward points. His peering eyes, upraised to balance the forward bend of his head, showed all the whites under the pupils.

In thick silence the two faces stayed there, motionless, then as noiselessly withdrew back into the room. Inga moved close again to Lash, and Lash felt her shiver. Fear had come to her, the fear of unnamed, unfamiliar things. Lash barely caught her low whisper.

"They heard us—saw us! He—he hears everything in this house! Every tiny sound!"

THERE was a murmur in the room, and a low-pitched whistle. Small noises drifted into the hall from outside the house. Clee Jordle appeared, with his mask of supercilious blankness back on his narrow face. He spoke as though he had seen and heard nothing from the doorway.

"I'll take you home now, Inga. Are you ready?" His courtesy was thin, and did not hide a sneer. His tone said that she would do as he commanded, ready or not.

The girl hesitated, her eyes on Lash's stonily controlled face. Before she had time to answer, Jordle took her arm.

"Come. Your—ah—esteemed father

may be worrying about you."

He looked at Lash as they passed along the hall to the front entrance, and for a brief instant the cold hate in his eyes was naked.

"You may go, Lash," he murmured.

He might as well have put his full meaning into words. Lash understood perfectly. He was condemned, sentenced, and the order had gone out for his execution. There was no tolerance on the Trey Diamond for a man who had said the things that he had said. Besides, he possessed dangerous knowledge, and had betrayed himself as not in tune with the Jordle designs.

Just where the execution would take place was an open question. Lash made swift conjecture, and gambled that it would happen as soon as Inga was safely out of the way. Lacking his gun, and without even a decent horse on which to attempt a break, it would be a simple matter to shoot him down and dump his body somewhere along the trail. Nobody would inquire too closely into the killing of the Red River outcast.

He strode swiftly along the hall, crossed the wide front porch, and descended the steps. It was almost dark now, and lights from the windows of the long bunkhouse sent yellow beams over the yard. Inga was in the saddle of her buckskin pony, and Clee Jordle was handing up her reins.

From over by the bunkhouse came Naal's flat voice. "Git yore nag out o' there, Lash. Put it in the corral."

"I'll do that," said Lash, and made his way toward the dozing old sorrel.

His eyes searched for Naal, and found him standing between two lighted windows. Reflected light etched the ridge of Naal's nose into a crooked line, picked out the curve of the long jaw, and filled the sunken cheeks. The shapes of other men became visible, all in shadow, quiet and unmoving.

Lash's course took him past the buckskin pony, and he sent no glance at Inga in the saddle. Clee Jordle, mounting his own animal, a sleek light chestnut, backed it away from the porch rail and reined it around. It was natural enough for Lash to pause and step aside out of the way. The movement put the chestnut gelding between himself and the bunkhouse.

He saw Clee Jordle's alert turn of the head, saw suspicion leap into the narrow eyes, and the dip of a hand under the smart riding coat, where a hidden gun formed a bulge.

Lash hurled himself forward and up, one long arm outstretched, the other drawn back. His fingers stabbed cloth, grabbed a hold. He hauled, struck one driving blow with a bone-hard fist, and used both hands to lift the overbalancing body out of the saddle.

Clee Jordle uttered something between a gasp and a cry. Lash braced his arms and heaved the struggling body backward over his head. A flying toe cracked him over one eye and scraped off his hat. He jumped at the nervously dancing chestnut, smacked his hand on the sleek flank, and landed in the saddle.

There was no time to find the stirrups. He got his heels under the animal's belly just in time, and the leap of it snapped back his head. A hasty glance to one side showed him the buckskin rearing up, snorting and pawing. Clee Jordle had crashed against it and scared it wild.

THE report of a gun slapped its solid crack into the confused tattoo of digging hoofs. The chestnut took on an extra spurt, intent on getting away from where it was, and headed on a dead run for no known destination. Lash, bent low, let it have its head, satisfied with any course that led away from the bunkhouse. More rapid shots

were thudding from that direction.

He took a look back over his shoulder. Flickering shadows of running men made crazy patterns on the level yard. The buckskin, with Inga still hanging on, was bolting around the house. He recognized the lean figure of Naal standing on spread legs, carefully sighting his gun. The weapon spat its livid streak and the chestnut leaped into a new gait.

It cracked again, and Naal's voice sang out an order: "Saddle up, some o' yuh! We'll git thet jigger! I hit him or the hoss, dunno which!"

He was more than correct. Lash heard the yelled words through a dull pounding in his head that presaged sharper pain to come. The second bullet had torn his scalp, leaving him just enough consciousness to stay in the jolting saddle. The other had got the horse somewhere. It was running in the headlong fashion of a wounded buck, mad with panic, spending all its failing strength in a senseless race against the inevitable end.

The inconsequent thought came to Lash that he was a horse thief, on top of everything else. Bank robber—jailbird—horse thief. A well rounded career of crime. Hated by all Red River, by both feuding factions, and marked for death on sight. No gun, no money, no friends, and riding off pursuit on a dying horse.

He wiped a trickle of blood from his eyes, and began to laugh. . . .

Hours later he lay bruised and aching in thick brush, staring dully through tangled branches at a high shale-bank. He could recall coming down that shale-bank—the lurch of the stumbling horse losing footing on the edge and going down under him; the loose shale slithering under the hoofs; the sprawling tumble as he and the horse rolled the rest of the way. He could not remember reaching the bottom, or getting all snarled up in this brush.

It was very quiet here. Mechanically he looked up at the moon, and judged the hour at something after midnight. A glint of metal nearby drew his attention. The horse lay there, dead and stiff-legged, its saddle-rig all tangled and broken. Lash studied it and groggily nodded his head.

"Thanks, horse—you did your best," he said aloud, and the sound of his own voice brought back more consciousness.

He lay and looked up again at the clear night sky, reading the stars. His head, he found, pointed due north. Next he made rough calculation, and figured he was somewhere between the lower Guadalupe foothills and Soldier Buttes. He had been headed south, and couldn't have got much farther than that. The Trey Diamond riders had probably passed by long ago, and would circle back by way of Hennessy Hills, scouring the country as they went.

That meant he was within walking distance of the border. He could be in Mexico before daylight. There was always room for a man on the run down in Cima, and a welcome place open for any man handy with a gun, rope and horse, as long as he wasn't particular about brands and property rights.

South was the best and only bet. Lash lay looking over his boots, pondering. They weren't such awfully comfortable boots. Not for walking. His feet cringed at the prospect. About a five-hours' tramp to the border. But Silver Wells was a long way back north, judged by footwork. And to count his enemies in Silver Wells meant merely lumping the whole population—and then adding to the sum the Jordles, their Trey Diamond gunhands, and practically every small rancher on the Red River range.

After awhile he sighed, got up, and began walking—toward the north. He had a job to do in Silver Wells.

THE main street had been filling all day. Any sort of wedding was enough to bring most of Red River into town. This particular wedding was more than an event for celebration. It posed a problem for every small rancher to discuss and mull over, while those outside of the two feuding factions made more or less cynical observations of their own.

For the first time in years, small ranchers brushed shoulders with Trey Diamond men. But they did not mingle, nor exchange greetings. The Trey Diamond men, as by arrogant right, took possession of the Blue Bottle. Even Harge Jordle condescended to honor his own barroom. He sat at a special table, cold and unmoved amid all the noise, and snapped finger and thumb at regular intervals. Each snap meant another free round of drinks on the house.

The Red River ranchers gathered in groups along the crowded street, and kept their talk quiet in the deepening shadows of early night. The thing was done, but they had not yet accepted the accomplished fact. There was an illogical element in such a marriage that was hard to dismiss.

The lights still burned in Thoreson's house, near the bank, but the guests were gone. A strange wedding, this had been, with little gaiety. Ram Thoreson, sitting alone in his downstairs living room, stared unseeingly at the opposite wall and wondered if he alone had detected the tragedy in it.

A step at the door made him look up. Inga Thoreson stood there, dressed for travel. He rose to meet her. His eyes searched hers, and revelation gave him sight to see beneath the bright, forced smile. He took her face between his hands.

"You lied to me, Inga!" he said huskily. "You told me you loved Clee. I believed you. I thought that perhaps Clee was different from his father. I thought this marriage would bring peace —happiness to you—make everything come out right. You don't love him, Inga. You hate him—fear him! I saw it in your eyes when—"

"No!" The girl pulled herself free. "You're wrong, Dad! I married him because—because I wanted to!"

Ram Thoreson slowly shook his head. "He must have made threats to you, told you of the evidence he and his father have dug up against me. So you —tried to save me—this way!"

"No!" Inga cried her denial again. "Dad—don't talk like that! Clee is coming for me. We're leaving at once —on—on—our honeymoon. I'm to send word to him when I'm — ready to —to go. He's waiting in the Blue Bottle, and said if I'm not ready soon, he'll —he'll—

"Give me a gun, Thoreson!" said Lash from the doorway.

He stood leaning tiredly against the door-frame, tall and ragged, his bloodshot reddened eyes resting on them. Blotched with dried blood and grime, his sweat-matted hair hanging over his wide forehead, face scratched and bruised, unshaven, he was hardly recognizable. His tattered shirt clung to him, and inside his broken ruins of boots, his feet were raw, swollen flesh.

Inga gave a stifled little cry. Thoreson jerked up his head, and his hands gripped tightly at his sides.

"You!" They said it together.

"Me," Lash agreed. His throat was rough and dry, making his voice unnatural. When he spoke, fresh cracks split open in his blistered lips. The sun had been blazing hot all day, and he had not looked for shade or water.

"How did you—?" began Thoreson.

"The alley," said Lash. "I came in the back door. It was open. The gun, Thoreson! I lost mine."

Thoreson compressed his lips.

"Can't you wait awhile longer?" he rapped. "Another hour—"

"No." Lash shook his head. He had to do it carefully, it ached and throbbed so. "I got no time to wait. The weddin's over, isn't it? I heard you both talkin'. Give me a gun—or a rifle—anything! I came back to do a job—an' I aim to do it! Try, anyway."

He followed the betraying flick of Thoreson's eyes to a shelf, and dragged his feet that way. Not one, but two guns lay on the shelf, holstered, coiled up in two filled cartridge belts. He took them down, buckled on the belts, and turned to send his look at Thoreson.

"One question, Thoreson. Did you make good the cash your depositors lost?"

"Every penny of it," said Thoreson heavily. "Took four years. I haven't made a dime out of that bank since breaking off with Jordle. But—I've slept fairly well. I've saved this Red River range for the men it belongs to—my friends. It was worth doing. I'd do it again—even sacrifice you again, Lash!"

"That's what I was—a sacrifice." Lash's grin was a weary grimace. "You should have told me, Thoreson. It would've made those five years easier. I'd have gone through with it, I think. After all, I was a Red River cowman, too, once."

HE stopped Inga's beginning question with a half-raised hand. Her eyes were wide, amazed.

"There's no fun," he went on, "in bein' a sacrifice, if you don't know you're doing some good by it. This thing you've done, Inga—it's wasted. They'll use you as another weapon against your father. They'll crush him first, then go after every cowman in this section. I know. Harge Jordle said so. The promises of the Jordles aren't worth a durn."

He swung abruptly for the door. Thoreson, his face white, strode after him. "Where are you going?"

"Where?" Lash looked back at him. "To the Blue Bottle! Where else would I go? That's where they are, isn't it?"

Thoreson choked on a word, grabbed him by an arm. "You mean that? You mean—but you came to kill me!"

"That was yesterday."

"But—are you mad? You'll never get out alive, man!"

"Hell," said Lash, "I don't expect to! Listen, Thoreson. I used to be a Red River cowman, till you sacrificed me to save the rest. Right? Well, I'd hate to chuck those five years away for nothin'. They stand for somethin'. Damn it, I'm proud of 'em! So I'll finish what you started."

He looked at Inga. She had come around her father, was standing slim and straight before him, and he read in her eyes a resolve to stop him.

"There's another matter, too," he said, and shoved them both back into the room. "But never mind that."

He pulled the door shut in their faces, turned the key, and shambled as fast as his sore feet would allow him out of the house. In the street, he headed at once for the glaring lights of the Blue Bottle. Faintly, his ears caught the hammering of fists against the locked door, the voice of Inga calling him back, and then the tinkle of broken glass. They were breaking out through a side window, but they would be too late to stop him.

He passed by lighted windows, and groups of men shut off their talk to stare at him with startled, unrecognizing eyes. Hatless, blood-smeared, caked with sweat and dust, his tangled hair falling down over his brows, he had the wild look of a badman in off a long trail. His shambling gait caused his two guns to slap against his lean thighs

and make themselves evident.

Spreading silence followed in his wake. Attention settled on him, until the crowded street was watching his progress along the boarded walk. Knots of men moved out of his way, and turned to look after his ragged figure, sensing the air of coming violence that he brought.

He reached and passed by the big windows of the Blue Bottle, made a half turn, and pushed through the batwing doors. They flapped together behind him while he stood and sent his seeking glance over the filled barroom.

So different, here in the saloon, compared with the street outside. Out there, grave talk, troubled speculations, sober men wondering what this marriage might mean. In here, loud laughter, heavy drinking, music, rattle of glasses. Tobacco smoke hazed the air, and the penetrating scent of whisky was thick and pungent.

The roar of sound brought more ache to Lash's head. The jangle of the pounded piano irritated him. Some fool was thumping out a mawkish ballad for a sour quartette. He picked out the table where the Jordles sat. Clee Jordle's back was toward him.

Lash faced toward it, aware that men nearby were suddenly regarding him with sharp, narrowed eyes. Trey Diamond men. The place was full of them, and no other kind. A lot of them were already drunk. Naal, hovering near the Jordle table, appeared to be the only one cold sober.

Lash felt Naal's eyes on him, probing, examining. Not bleary with drink, these eyes, but chill and alert. A good watchdog, the Naal gunman.

"Jordle!" Lash called out the name. "Clee Jordle! Turn an' make your draw—right now!"

THE jangling of the piano ended on a discordant crash, and the toppling over of two chairs added to the sound. Then silence. Men craned necks to stare over heads, mouths hanging open. Eyes, drink-glazed and unbelieving, goggled at Lash. A drunk snickered, thinking the whole thing some kind of wedding rahoo.

The two Jordles stood by their tumbled chairs. Clee had risen and whirled, his right hand under his coat. His thin lips moved, but no sound came. Fear and amazement put their petrifying touch on him. Out in the street someone was shouting. Harge Jordle, too arrogant to know fear, stood straight and stiff. His bloodless face retained its marble-like impassivity. His eyes, guided by his abnormal sense of hearing, bored unseeingly at Lash.

He spoke a quiet aside. "Get him, Naal!"

Naal, already poised to draw, flashed into immediate action. The slice of his hand was a juggler's feat that ended in an explosive lick of short-lived fire. The ragged ball of its smoke was dissolving before Lash cleared his guns and triggered their double blast. He had had no eyes for Naal, but only for Clee Jordle.

He was stumbling backward as he fired, punched hard by Naal's bullet. Dimly above the rattling echoes he heard the voice outside again, and it was shouting his name along with other words. Strength was draining fast out of his legs. He sank to one knee, unable to stay upright, and swayed there, cocking his guns with fumbling thumbs.

Naal gave a convulsive jerk, stood slowly blinking as though faced with an incredible fact, took an uncertain step, and reeled heavily against Harge Jordle. Somebody swore, and whipped a shot at Lash.

Lash felt the burning bite of it, but all his regard was back on Clee Jordle. He

levelled his guns to shoot and have done with it, but something was the matter with his eyes. He couldn't see properly. Everything was going into a jiggle, and Clee Jordle had dodged, his hand showing a flash of blue metal. He had dodged aside, unwittingly half blocking out the figure of his father. Lash held his fire, not trusting himself to shoot at that merged, hazy target. It wasn't right to take a chance on killing a blind man, no matter what kind of devil he was.

Harge Jordle muttered an impatient word as Naal fell against him. He thrust fastidiously at the sinking body, and his white hand encountered Naal's smoking gun. He gripped it, tore it loose from the limp fingers, and fitted its heavy butt into his palm. With a slender forefinger on the trigger, he pointed its muzzle straight at the spot where his ears told him Lash stood.

He fired, one shot after another, until the gun was emptied, then dropped it. His calm, contemptuous smile came out. He had succeeded where his number one gunman had failed. He had cut down that reckless madman while his hirelings, slow-witted with drink, looked on. He drew himself up straighter than ever.

"Well, Clee," he murmured coolly, "that's another matter finished, h'm?"

The thump of a fallen body, close to him, made him frown slightly. He said sharply, "Clee!"

Seconds of hushed silence dragged by, before a Trey Diamond man spoke in an awed, stammering whisper.

"My Lawd! He—he—my Lawd, boss! Five shots—right in his back! You've killed him dead! Yore son—yore son Clee! My Lawd, boss—!"

Lash, his guns drooping, gazed with clouded vision at the tumbled body of Clee Jordle. Some sort of regret went through him. "Too bad," he mumbled. "Pity. I figgered—to do that—m'self."

SUDDEN noise and gun-thunder seemed to explode around him all at once. Voices yelled, the shapes of men swirled about, and dust rose from the floor to the tramp of feet. The big front window caved in with a terrific crash, and the shattering bang of the doors being slammed open mingled with the din.

It was all very unreal. Lash went down under the weight of a man he had not shot. He rolled the body off. A gun veered, and its seeking muzzle came to rest on him. He fired from the floor at the owner. Men were surging by him, back and forth. They seemed to be struggling, fighting hand to hand.

Another body fell across Lash and flattened him on the floor. He found he could not summon strength to push it off, found he did not care much, and let his grimed face rest on the rough boards. It was comfortable enough here for a man to rest—sleep—die. . . .

He closed his tired eyes.

It was very comfortable here. Remarkably comfortable. Lash moved his fingers. Now, here was a queer thing. He couldn't feel the floor any more. Was that what happened when a man was dying? The nerves, perhaps, died first, and left the body without any sense of feeling.

And that fellow who had fallen on him—he must have rolled off. The weight wasn't there any more. Very queer. But he *could* feel something under his exploring fingers. Something a lot softer than floorboards. What the hell!

He opened his eyes. It hadn't occurred to him that he could do that. He peered solemnly at what he knew was an unearthly vision, at surroundings celestial and far removed from the world.

"Y'know," he said, speaking a thought aloud, "it ain't hard to die. But

how the heck did you get here, Doc?"

Doc Hant, putting things into a black bag, sent him an unheavenly look. "Go back to sleep," he grunted. "I got more to do than answer fool questions. Seventeen patients, all bunged up an' howlin' for attention! Pah! Doubt if I'll ever get paid for it, either! Huh—I'll tell 'em you're awake."

"Tell who?"

"Who'd you think?" Doc stalked out.

Soon, footsteps sounded. The door opened. A bandaged face poked in, followed by a body, one arm in a sling.

"Well," greeted a voice behind the bandage, "how do you feel?"

"About the way you look," said Lash. "Who or what're you?"

"I'm what's left of Ram Thoreson."

"Oh. What's the disguise for?"

"Doc wound it on me after the fight," explained Thoreson.

"What fight? Mine?"

"Ours." Thoreson came and sat on the bed. "That was a dirty kind of trick, locking me in my living room, downstairs."

"I'm in your house, then?"

"Sure." Thoreson nodded. "By the time we got out, you were in the Blue Bottle. There was only one thing to do. I told everybody how we two had faked that robbery so's I'd have money to break off with Jordle—how you deliberately took the blame and sacrificed yourself for the sake of—"

"Eh?" Lash raised his gauze-wrapped head from the pillow. "How I—what?"

"That's my story," said Thoreson, "and don't you go making me out a liar. Anyway, I've told it so often now, I believe it myself. I shouted it up and down the street. I told 'em everything. I told 'em they were a bunch of yellow dogs if they didn't follow you into the Blue Bottle and back you up."

"I remember somebody shouting," Lash recalled.

"THAT was me." Thoreson took out his pipe and stuffed it with his one good hand. "The shooting started just about that time. I stopped Inga—she was running for the Blue Bottle—and by the time I'd told her to go home, every cowman was heading for it. So I picked up a single-tree outside the gen'ral store and joined in. It was quite a party, while it lasted."

"How'd it end?" asked Lash.

"It kind of petered out," replied Thoreson. "Somebody set fire to the Blue Bottle. Everybody ran out and that broke up the fight. We pulled out the disabled parties—including you—and some of us went back for Harge Jordle. He wasn't hurt, but he just sat there. We heard, since, how Clee got killed. He told us to get the hell off his property, so we did. A minute later we heard a shot. Went in and found him dead. He'd got Clee's gun."

They said no more until a light, fast step tapped on the stairs. Thoreson rose to go.

"Inga's pretty busy, helping Doc," he remarked. "She's—"

"Yeah," said Lash. "G'bye."

"She makes a right good nurse," Thoreson said.

Thoreson moved to the door. The coming footsteps were very close outside. "Here she comes now. Looks sort of excited. You know, Lash, when it comes to reading a woman's mind, I'm not worth a—"

"Damn," Lash supplied the expletive. "An' now—would you mind gettin' the heck out o' here?"

Inga, just entering, paused. She looked a little startled. "Me?"

"No," said Lash. "No. No-no. Your old man—father, I mean. That's right. S'long, Thoreson. Hello, Inga. Listen—I need attention. I got pains. I—I—come here!"

She was a very good nurse. She came to him at once.

# The Wild Bunch Rides to War

*Note: You'll find another thrilling Wild Bunch yarn—"Wild Bunch Gun Outcast"—in the February issue of TWO GUN WESTERN NOVELS. At your favorite newsstand now!*

By ED EARL REPP

*Author of "Wild Bunch Wipe-Out," etc.*

*Two shots rang out, but Tremaine's bullet went thudding into the ceiling*

***The shot that killed Pop Stevens was a battle clarion to Butch Cassidy and his men. For Pop was their friend, and his dry-gulching meant that Scarp Tremaine's range devils were out for Wild Bunch bounty!***

THE last traces of the Wind River country twilight deepened into dusk as five horsemen wound their way along the willow fringed course of the Popo Agie river. The animals trod cautiously, almost stealthily, long trained in the ways of their riders. These horsemen were wanted men. They rode at night and the light of the pale Wyoming moon was their only guiding beacon.

The leader of the quintet sat regally in his saddle. His thick chest and wide shoulders cast a massive shadow in silhouette against the waning light. His leonine head was held high and his cobalt eyes shuttled back and forth for any signs of approaching danger. Butch Cassidy, leader of the Wild Bunch, had to be constantly on the lookout. In every couvert there might lurk a would-be bushwhacker, greedy for the reward that was offered for Wild Bunch scalps.

On either side of Butch rode his compatriots. Tall Ben Kilpatrick, a Texan and a tie-hard gunman. His clear blue eyes spelled terror for many who crossed his path and his gunswift was shaded by few.

On the other side was Kid Curry who was a veteran of the long trails in spite of his extreme youth. Trailing along behind was the lanky youth known as the Sundance Kid and the small, ner-

vous gunman known to the Wild Bunch as The Merino.

With no word spoken, but as if by an unseen signal from Butch, the five slowed their ponies until they barely moved. The only sound that broke the stillness of the evening was the dull *clop, clop* of the animals' hooves and that sound was barely detectable. Suddenly Butch raised his hand and brought his horse to an abrupt stop. His head came up like that of a great panther sensing danger near at hand. . . .

The others followed suit and they held immobile for many seconds. Then Sundance broke the silence. "What is it, Butch?" he asked in a low voice.

"Listen," replied the big man and again the oppressive stillness bore down upon them. Then, after a moment's waiting came the sound that had caused Butch Cassidy to draw rein. It was low and faint but unmistakable. Gunfire was not uncommon in this raw, wild country but to the Wild Bunch this particular sound carried a grim warning. Ben Kilpatrick turned slowly toward Butch. "I wonder?" he began in a low voice.

Butch hesitated a moment. "Mebbeso," he grunted. "C'mon, boys, let's ride. We'll find out what this business is about."

He roweled his horse lightly and the animal broke into a running gait. The others did likewise. They wound their way through the low fringe of willows and finally gained the benchland above the river bottom. This was covered only by low sagebrush and the horses broke into a hard gallop.

As they galloped through the darkness Butch realized that caution was being thrown to the winds. The sound of their approach could be heard for a great distance. But there was another matter more urgent. If the sign read right, an old man was being besieged by a gang of ruthless cut-throats.

A feeling of horror clutched at Butch's heart as he thought of old Pop Stevens being under ambush. The oldster had been almost a father to the Wild Bunch. Once a member of the Hole-in-the-Wall gang, Butch had pensioned him off when he became too old to ride. He had gotten a little spread down in the Popo Agie valley where he could spend his declining years in comfort.

Butch used Pop Stevens' place many times as a relay station. Fresh horse, food, and plenty of ammunition were kept there and the Wild Bunch always looked forward with keen anticipation to their visits with the oldster. They had been bound for Pop Stevens' place this very evening. Butch had pictured the old man's joy when he heard the sound of the owlhoot and knew that his boys were coming back to him. Now only a dull feeling of dread coursed through the veins of the big renegade leader.

The sound of the gunfire became louder and more distinct as they neared the scene of battle. There was no doubt now that the place was Pop Stevens' spread. The sound came from that exact location. Butch prayed that Pop could only hold out until the Wild Bunch could arrive to give help.

They sped along for another mile, up and down through small draws, splashing across narrow streams. Then suddenly Butch's hopes were dashed to bits. The firing ceased. . . .

Butch pulled up abruptly with his men behind him. He hoped mightily for a resumption but as the moments passed only the stillness of death greeted him.

"They've stopped," he said hoarsely. A moment later he added, "Just means about one thing."

"They've got Pop," put in Kid Curry hollowly.

Butch nodded mechanically. Then he

gigged his pony and loosened the reins. They started off again in a gait much slower than before. Once more the going became cautious and stealthy.

A few minutes later Butch let the horse down a slight declivity that led into a grove of cottonwoods. The five men pulled up beside a rough log shed. Further ahead loomed the shadows of other buildings and more trees.

Full darkness had fallen now and along the rim of the eastern horizon was a light glow that heralded the ascent of the rising moon. The shadows of the buildings were ghostly in the gloom and all about was the eerie quiet of the Wyoming night.

SUDDENLY Butch lifted his head. His throat constricted and from his barrel chest rolled the quavering hoot of an owl. The echo fell back on his ears then faded away into the night. They dismounted, ground-anchored their horses, and started toward the buildings on foot.

As quietly as a cougar stalking its prey, they went on. Hands were close to revolver butts in case the necessity should arise. Like hooded wraiths they drew up to the side of Pop's low log cabin.

Suddenly a low whimpering sound issued through the stillness. It was like a lament and Butch turned to try and locate the source of the whining sound. Then slowly he went forward. The other members of the Wild Bunch watched silently while the big man knelt down. The little black dog came forlornly toward him with his tail curved between his legs. The dog had been Pop's inseparable companion for more years than Butch could remember. Now as the big longrider put out his hand and the small animal muzzled against it. In the dog's eyes was the mute narration of the tragic story.

Now the small beast pulled away and tugged gently at Butch's coat sleeves. The big man saw instantly the silent appeal. He rose and followed the dog. The others came along behind. At the corner of the building they stopped. The shadow of a figure lay at his feet and Butch struck a match. The flickering glow revealed the bedraggled figure of the old man sprawled in the dust.

Cassidy knelt down, rolled the old man over and looked into the drawn face. He raised the grey head up and cradled it in his huge arms. Ben Kilpatrick lit another match. A glance at the masklike features told them that death had put an end to any suffering the oldster might have known during the last moments of life.

A mingled feeling of sorrow and burning hatred surged through the big Wild Bunch leader. Mentally he conjured the picture of the oldster making a game and last desperate stand against his besiegers. What had Pop done to deserve this? Butch asked the question of himself.

"They got you, old timer," he grated low. "But the game isn't over. When it is, the score'll be even."

"Pop was the whitest man that ever lived," said the Sundance Kid. "Whoever in hell would have wanted to do away with him?"

"Whoever did it," drawled big Ben Kilpatrick, "was gunnin' for the Wild Bunch. Two to one they were trying to pump him as to our whereabouts."

"They'll find out," cut in the Merino, rasping his thumbs violently across his cartridge tops, "sooner than they expect."

Butch lifted the old man's body up into his arms and carried him into the cabin. He laid the inert figure on the crude bed in the corner of the room and the Texan lit the wick of a small kerosene lamp on the table. The sputtering flame threw a yellow, flickering glow across the log walls. It was then that

Butch's attention was drawn to the appearance of another man sprawled on the floor. He was face down and a six-shooter lay a few inches from the outstretched fingers. Butch bent down and rolled the prone man over so the face was exposed to the dim light. Instantly recognition lighted his cobalt eyes.

It was Kid Curry who voiced the identification. "Nig Malloy," he said sharply. "That just about puts the finger on the ones that devilled Pop."

"You're right, Kid," grunted Butch. "Scorp Tremaine and his gang. They've been after Wild Bunch bounty for a long time. When the old man wouldn't squawk, this happened."

The interior of the cabin showed signs of terrific struggle. Bullet holes dotted the walls. It was evident that Nig Malloy had gained the interior and had fought at close quarters with the oldster. Pop's bullet had ended the renegade's life. Then the old man, perhaps mortally wounded, had staggered to the outside where he fell for the last time.

An inspection of the corrals showed them completely devoid of stock. Tremaine had made a clean sweep of the horses, many of which the Wild Bunch used for relays on their travels through the Wind River country. Some of their ammunition caches had been found and the supply looted. The sign was plain. Scorp Tremaine was after the Wild Bunch. But Pop Stevens had remained faithful to his boys. He died without giving an inkling as to the whereabouts of Cassidy and his gang.

Butch realized this to the fullest extent. When the inspection of the ranch was completed, a rising tide of hatred surged within him. His mighty fists were clenched until the knuckles showed white. His lips were set in a grim, tight line. He read the silent pact in the eyes of his four compatriots. The vow that there would be no rest for the Wild Bunch until Pop's murder was avenged to the fullest extent. Until the ruthless renegades had paid drop for drop of the old man's life blood.

They laid Pop Stevens to rest in a spot behind the cabin sheltered by a huge cottonwood. While the moon climbed into the heavens they stood with bared heads in silent tribute to the courageous oldster. Then they covered the grave and sealed it with rocks to thwart despoilment by savage beasts.

"I reckon you'll be watchin' from someplace up there, old timer," muttered Butch finally. "I hope you won't blame us for not bein' on time to help. Anyway, we'll see that the debt's paid."

THEIR duties at the oldster's ranch were finished. There was little point in remaining longer and a more pressing demand that they move on so Butch gave the order to ride.

"What'll we do with the dog?" asked Sundance before they started.

"We'll take him along," stated Butch. "We can't leave him here to starve. Maybe we can find a home for him someplace. That would be the way Pop would ask us to do."

Once more atop their horses they continued their way along the downward course of the Popo Agie river. Butch rode at point, carrying the small dog in the saddle with him.

For one of the few times in his life, Butch was at sea as to where to find his enemies. The attackers of Pop's ranch had fled before the Wild Bunch arrived on the scene. Consequently they could not be sure of the direction they had taken. To make matters more difficult, none of the Wild Bunch could recognize Scorp Tremaine on sight. He was practically a newcomer to the Wind River country but the news of his exploits had reached the Wild Bunch through Butch's intricate system

of espionage. Butch had learned from friends that Tremaine was after Wild Bunch scalps. Whether or not Scorp Tremaine could recognize any of the Wild Bunch, Butch could not be certain.

Nig Malloy, the unfortunate member of Tremaine's gang, had once been one of Butch's men. When the big longrider kicked Nig out of the Hole-in-the-wall, he joined up with Tremaine. For that reason Butch recognized the dead renegade.

Now Butch was leading his men in the direction that seemed most logical. To go up the river would only take them further into the wilderness. It was unlikely that Tremaine would choose that direction. This trail would lead them into one or other of the small towns that the ruthless outlaws would be likely to frequent.

The moon had arched past its zenith and was starting its downward path toward the western horizon when the five Wild Bunch riders drew rein on the point of a small hill and gazed with casual eyes at a few twinkling lights which were scattered in the midst of the flat river bottom country below. They were able to make out the ghostly shapes of a scattering of buildings and of the low fringe of willows that lay along the banks of the Popo Agie.

"Arapahoe," Butch muttered absently. "Might as well go down and see what's goin' on. Mebbe hear some trail talk."

Without further words the let their animals down the easy slope. In a few minutes they rode in between the rows of false fronted buildings. The streets were completely deserted at this hour of the night. The sound of the horse's hoofs echoed hollowly as they trotted on the hard, sun-baked dirt and an eerie silence fell all around.

At one place in the middle of the block, a light, larger than the rest, shone out through a front window. It threw a feeble glow across the board sidewalk. It was the only place where there was any outward sign of life.

"Saloon's open," stated Butch. "Good a place as any to stop."

They rode up to the front of the board fronted saloon, dismounted, and left the horses standing, untied, by the hitching rail. Then, with Butch carrying the small black dog, they paraded through the batwing doors.

They stopped at the entrance and blinked to get accustomed to the light of the interior. When the vision had cleared sufficiently they all took in the inside of the building in one broad, sweeping glance.

There was little activity in the saloon. A beefy, bald-headed bartender dozed behind the long board structure of a bar. He looked up sleepily when the five men entered. At a table in the far corner of the room four men sat engaged in a poker game. They turned and watched the Wild Bunch walk toward the bar. Butch studied their faces. They were hard-eyed, renegade type. All were heavily armed and they eyed the newcomers suspiciously. There was nobody else in the saloon except a man sleeping soundly on a bench in the corner.

Butch Cassidy strode to the bar and his men fanned out on either side. He sat the dog down on the rough boards. The sleepy bartender shuffled up to get their order and gruffly demanded what they wanted. He was little concerned with the five other than the fact that they disturbed his peaceful slumbers.

"Monogram," was Butch's sharp reply in answer to the barkeep's demand. "An' some milk for the dog."

THE bartender looked up sharply now. He saw the small animal for the first time. His eyebrows lifted in astonishment at seeing a dog perched

meekly on top of the bar. He had never been put face to face with a situation like this. A saloon, the barkeep thought, was no place for a dog. Then he frowned disapprovingly and voiced his displeasure.

"This here ain't a zoo, Mister," he complained in a gruff voice. "We ain't in the habit of feedin' dogs or hawses or—"

Butch's cobalt eyes looked coldly into the small, beady orbs of the greasy aproned menial. "I said I wanted some milk for the dog," he said in a low, flat voice.

"Better do it, Bottles," cut in Kid Curry. "This feller has been in the habit of gettin' what he wants for so long that he naturally expects it."

The man behind the bar started to voice his opinion of people who always wanted their way, then thought again and changed his mind. The looks on the faces of the five men told him that the less trouble he had with them, the better. Even if it was only over the matter of feeding a dog.

He moved away grudgingly. The Wild Bunch watched him rummage behind the bar. A moment later he came up with two cans of milk. He broke the cans open with a hunting knife and poured the contents into a broken dish. Butch and the boys watched with enterest while the dog lapped the milk eagerly. Then they turned to the whisky which the bartender had set out.

With occasional glances they surveyed the four poker players. The glances appeared to be the most casual. But in reality Butch was scrutinizing the men closely. He was analyzing in his mind every feature and every peculiar mannerism of each one. He was listening to the few words they spoke, taking careful notice of each man's voice. He reachd back into the recesses of his memory to try and associate these with any he had known in the past. He turned to Ben Kilpatrick, the tall Texan, who was standing next to him.

"Recognize any of those fellers?" he grunted in a low voice. His manner was as casual as if he had merely been discussing the weather.

"Been tryin' to place them myself," replied the Texan. "That one on the other side of the table looks a little bit familiar."

Butch didn't answer but watched the man for a long while out of the corner of his eye. Then he turned back to the tall man by his side. "Slug Manton," he muttered. "Remember him?"

"That's him all right, Butch," replied Ben. "Didn't even know he was in Wyomin'. He was run out a year ago."

"Wonder if that's the gang we're lookin' for," spoke up Sundance from the other side.

"Don't know," said Butch. "It ain't beyond possibility. We'll find out pretty soon."

The five members of the Wild Bunch lingered at the bar over their drinks. The bartender had ceased to become interested in them and had taken up his sleeping where Cassidy's boys had interrupted. The four poker players were interested in their game and paid no more attention to the five at the bar. If they had been suspicious at first, their suspicions apparently had passed. It was evident that none of the men had recognized them as the Wild Bunch. The appearance of Cassidy's longriders any place created more than a casual stir.

The dog finished his milk and was less meek and more active than he had been before. He wagged his tail when Butch stroked his fur gently.

Suddenly the door of the saloon flew open and a man stood in the open portal. Butch and the others turned to eye him critically. He was a man of medium stature but his figure was impos-

ing. He was smooth shaven except for a short, neatly trimmed black mustache. His garb was immaculate. He wore an expensive, high crowned white Stetson and the finest hand-made boots. Two pearl-handled six shooters hung from a silver-studded cartridge belt. On the man's olive colored face was a smug look of self satisfaction.

Without pretending to show interest Butch watched the man while he strode arrogantly toward the poker table at the rear. The newcomer paid no attention to the men at the bar. Apparently he regarded them as cowpunchers in for a drink. The lateness of the hour seemingly did not impress him as being out of the ordinary.

It was then that Butch noticed the dog for the first time. The animal had been half-concealed from the others behind the shoulders of the big longrider. Now Butch watched the hair at the back of his neck bristle and a low, guttural growl escaped from his throat. He half-bared his teeth in a snarl.

BUTCH put a quieting hand around the animal's neck. Nobody had noticed the animal's behavior. The bartender was peacefully oblivious to the whole thing and none of the others had seen. The five members of the Wild Bunch watched the stranger while he approached the poker table and sat down in a vacant chair. There were short grunts of greeting from the card players. The man did not take a hand in the game but contented himself with watching.

"Did you see the dog when that feller came in, Butch?" asked Sundance when the man had lowered himself into a chair.

"Yeah," Butch replied. "I think that's our huckleberry, boys. Least, he's one of the gang. Dogs don't snarl for nothing."

"Only when they smell skunk," clipped the Merino.

"How're yuh goin' to find out if he's Tremaine, Butch?" asked Kid Curry.

"I'll find out," responded the big man. "Hang on to the dog, Ben, an' keep him outa sight. I'm goin' over an' ask a few questions."

He took a hitch in his gun belt. The black butts of the two forty-fives jutted menacingly from the holsters. With an easy and graceful manner, he strolled toward the poker table.

The players did not see Butch approaching until he stopped and towered above then. With a start they drew back at the sudden presence of the intruder. Then the one they had identified as Slug Manton regained his composure.

"This is a private game, Mister," he snarled. "Strangers ain't welcome."

"I wasn't aimin' tuh horn in on your game," said Butch easily. "Just tryin' to get some information."

The newcomer to the room regarded him suspiciously. "What were you wantin' to know?" he cracked out.

Butch held his answer for a few long moments. The card players had stopped and held the pasteboards poised. A silence fell over the room broken only by the low snoring sound of the sleeping bartender. The other four Wild Bunch members had slid down the bar nearer the scene of the drama.

"I was just wonderin'," Butch said finally. "If any of you gents could tell me where I could find a feller by the name of Scorp Tremaine."

If the immaculately garbed man had experienced any shock at the sudden question, he concealed it well. His answer was cool and calm. "What would you be wantin' to see this fellow for?"

"I would like to tell him that Butch Cassidy wants to see him?" His words had been low, almost soft, but they echoed in the quiet room.

The poker players flashed looks to one another. Slug Manton sat bolt upright as if the name recalled a half forgotten memory. Butch's cohorts stood as still as granite statues. Ben Kilpatrick held a restraining hand on the small dog and all eyes were fixed on their huge leader.

The bartender awoke with a start at the mention of the name Cassidy. A terrified look crossed his face and he made no attempt to move. Even the man who had been sleeping soundly in the back of the room came erect. Only the olive-skinned man remained as collected as he had when Butch asked the first shocking question.

"I'm afraid you're lookin' in the wrong place, stranger," said the man. "Scorp Tremaine don't hang around here."

"That's funny," said Butch. "I was told he did."

"What does Butch Cassidy want with Scorp Tremaine," the man asked.

"I heard that Tremaine was lookin' for him," was Butch's sharp reply. "An' the Wild Bunch."

Quietly Ben Kilpatrick had released the dog. It hopped down from the bar and slunk behind the poker table then came up behind the one who had spoken to Butch. When he had reached the man's side he emitted a low snarl.

The immaculately-garbed one whirled sharply. When he saw the dog's head a foot away, he flung a booted foot at it. The dog recoiled from the attempted blow. Then with a snarl louder and more savage than before he made a lunge and sank his fangs in the leg which had struck. The man made a dive for his holster.

Before he could clear leather, Butch's gun was out and its muzzle was trained on the man's middle. "Don't try to shoot him," Butch snapped harshly.

"What do you mean?" snarled the man savagely. "The damn fool bit me."

"He bit you," shot back Butch. "Because he recognized the man that murdered his master. You didn't think a dog would show you up when you murdered Pop Stevens, did you, Scorp Tremaine."

Butch had slid his gun back into the holster during his speech. Scorp Tremaine watched the move. Butch Cassidy was apparently off his guard.

Suddenly he shoved his chair back and dove for the floor. "Gut shoot 'em, boys," he screeched as he dropped to the floor. "We've been after these buzzards for a long time."

At that moment there was a loud scraping of chairs. The table was overturned and the cards and chips spilled across the floor. Scorp Tremaine had made for his gun as he left his chair. The weapon came up while he fell and his finger tightened on the trigger. Two shots rang out and Tremaine's bullet went thudding into the ceiling a moment before the gun dropped from his fingers. A bluish hole had appeared in the middle of his forehead and his eyes took on the lusterless hue of death. Butch stood with the smoking weapons in his hand which had dealt swift justice.

With the firing of the two shots the crowd broke into pandemonium. The Wild Bunch had gone into action at the first move. Ben Kilpatrick and the Merino fanned out on one side of Butch and Kid Curry and Sundance on the other. Their guns had come up as if by magic.

Butch dropped to his knee when his first bullet felled Scorp Tremaine. A deep feeling of satisfaction came to him in the knowledge that Pop's death had in some measure been avenged. Now his other gun was unholstered and in his hand. As he pushed into the fray he felt a bullet tug at his sleeve.

Some of the renegades had barricaded themselves behind the upturned table. Unafraid of danger, the Merino and Kid

Curry circled the barricade and attacked from the rear. The whining leaden slugs filled the room and imbedded themselves in the walls. The acrid, stinging fumes of burnt powder rose up and filled the room. The narrow walls echoed and re-echoed the loud reports. The terrified bartender had long since ducked to safety behind the sanctuary of the long bar.

BUTCH watched his men out of the corner of his eye while his flaming guns blasted out in a requiem of death and hate. Sundance was down on one knee and there was a dark spot of blood on his left side. Kid Curry's hat had intercepted a bullet and had been whisked from his head, revealing a shock of blond hair. He could barely see the tall Texan through the film of smoke but big Ben Kilpatrick was triggering away at the renegades.

He saw Slug Manton fold over with a bullet from the Merino's gun in his stomach. Another renegade was down and his gun skewered from his hand as the arm flung out in its last movement of life.

Butch thought of the loyalty and courage of those four men during the heat of the raging battle. They were staunch members of this little band of his. One that any man could be more than proud to lead and each and every one was a friend that any person could be lucky to have. He knew that any one of them would see him right on through the smoke to the last ditch.

Suddenly, with a terrified feeling, he saw a renegade gun come out from behind the table and point straight at Ben Kilpatrick. The man was taking careful aim not to miss his target. He was behind the table so Butch could not get him with his own gun.

Butch knew of only one course. He dropped his gun and made a savage leap. He dove over the table and on to the back of the murderous renegade. The man's gun went off as Butch hit. His aim was spoiled and the bullet went whistling harmlessly past the tall Texan's ear.

The sudden impact of Butch's huge body caused the gun to fall from the renegade's grip. The two men rolled over and they came up again with Butch on top. His big hands went out at the man's throat. He got his grip and held, squeezing tighter and tighter. The renegade's tongue lolled out. He gasped for breath and Butch's grip became stronger. The outlaw's face became purple from strangulation and suddenly there was a cracking noise and the struggle subsided. Butch rose quietly and left the lifeless man in a heap on the floor.

With the cessation of firing the bartender poked his round, bald head from behind the board planking that covered the bar. A moment later another man, equally terrified, rose up to stand beside the menial. Butch saw them and walked across the room.

"Were you hooked up with these jaspers," asked Butch quickly.

"Goshamighty, no, Mister Cassidy," stammered the white faced barkeep.

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"Never even saw 'em before."

"Well, we made quite a mess of your saloon," replied the big longrider. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. He tossed them on the bar. "Maybe this'll pay for cleanin' up."

Butch called his men together for an inspection of injuries. There were no casualties except a few nicks. The wound in Sundance Kid's side had been purely superficial. He turned once more to the dead renegades.

"I guess they found the Wild Bunch all right," he muttered. "That's what they were lookin' for."

Suddenly from outside there came the hollow sound of people running along the sidewalks and on the streets.

"People have heard the commotion," said Kid Curry quickly. "The sheriff'll be here, sure as hell."

"I guess that's our cue to exit, boys," snapped Butch curtly. "We don't want to forget that we're wanted men."

He turned to go but then stopped. "I gotta take care of somethin' first," he said.

He walked back toward the bar. "Bottles, I'm goin' to give you a dog," he said as he saw the small animal come sneaking around the end of the counter with its tail once more between its legs.

"You're goin' tuh what?" gasped the astonished bartender.

"I'm givin' yuh this pup," he repeated. "You fed him good a while ago. An' you better take good care of him. I may visit you once in a while an' I'd like to see him healthy when I do."

Butch reached down and lifted the pup to the top of the bar. The little dog watched the bartender with meek eyes and the menial watched the pup with a look something akin to disgust.

Butch backed away slowly with his eyes on the bar. The man continued to stare belligerently at the dog but the animal crawled up closer and nuzzled against the man's arm. The expression on the round face slowly changed from a frown of disapproval to a smile. Butch turned to face the door. "So long, Bottles," he said. "I'll be seeing you."

He pushed through the batwing doors and running people were almost at the saloon. The rest of the Wild Bunch were already atop their horses. Butch swung into the saddle as the first of the townsmen came up. "Stop," the man said. "In the name of the law."

Butch reined his horse around. "Ain't got time tonight, Marshal," he called over his shoulder. "Maybe some other time."

Before the gaping townsmen, five horsemen streaked down the rutted street and soon were lost in the shadows of the night, leaving only the echo of the dying hoofbeats. Moments later the hoofbeats, too, were gone. . . .

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# *Ghost-Guards Ride the Sunset Stage*

**By PETER DAWSON**

*Author of "Owlhoot Outcast," etc.*

*Llano waited for the thing that didn't happen. "I can't shoot a man who hasn't got the guts to draw!" he taunted*

***Until those bullion-crazed badmen made a joke of justice and set a law-trap for his life, the only odds Llano Ackers had ever asked were his fists and his six-guns!***

LLANO ACKERS knew he was licked the day Pat Sewell, his one remaining driver, wanted ten dollars a mile to take a bullion stage the thirty-eight miles from the smelter at Lode to the bank at Butte.

He had a lot of things to say to Pat, things he later wished he hadn't said. But he was a stubborn man, Pat was stubborn too, and it was hard after all these months to realize what the oldster's refusal meant.

Pat's final words were, "Hell, Llano, the money I'm askin' wouldn't any more than pay for buryin' me!"

That grim reminder was the thing that checked Llano's anger, made him say, "Maybe I've been runnin' off at the mouth, Pat." And he knew from the look in the oldster's eyes that he was already forgiven.

Because he had never before run up against a thing he couldn't whip with either his six-foot, wide-built frame, his guns or his brains, he decided to do his own driving that night on the run to Butte. And because he didn't know any man but Pat good enough with a shotgun to trust, he decided to make the trip alone.

Late that afternoon he scrawled a two-line message on a sheet of paper and sealed it in an envelope and paid a youngster a quarter to take it out to Bob Morley at the smelter, promising another quarter when he received Morley's answer. Old Bob's message was: *We can try anything once.*

At eight that night, giving Pat the last of his pay, Llano told him: "There's five dollars extra there, Pat. I want to use your team and buckboard tonight."

"You got somethin' in your craw, Llano. What is it?" Pat was frowning.

"Check out of your room at the hotel, tell anyone who wants to know that you're headed down to Butte to look for work. Hitch your team and drive your rig out to the fork that cuts north half a mile from town. Hide the outfit above the forks and take your blankets up into the hills and sleep out tonight. I'll have your rig back at the stable by mornin'." He paused, then added, "And you might leave your Greener under the seat."

Pat leafed a five-dollar bill from his sheaf of paper-money. "Take it back, friend. You never heard me ask a man money for doin' a favor, least of all you. You're a damn fool for makin' this try, but anything I got you're welcome to. I'll have everything set."

LLANO spent a good twenty minutes deciding what to take in the way of guns. His final choice was the usual walnut-handled Colts .45 slung low in its holster at his thigh, another in a seldom-worn spring-holster at his left armpit beneath his vest.

At ten o'clock he swung his three-team Barlow-Sanderson in behind the loading-platform alongside Bob Morley's private office at the smelter. The cherry-red glow from the two high chimneys gave the four men who immediately came from the office enough light to work by. Llano had nothing to say beyond, "Make it fast, gents!" and old Bob Morley, one of the four, didn't once open his mouth as he helped lug out the heavy burlap-wrapped bars and hand them up to Llano to be stored in the boot, but twice he caught Llano's eye and each time he gave a sly wink.

It took seven minutes to load. Llano spent those seven minutes wondering which of these three Morley had picked as trustworthy men was the one who each time gave away the secret of these bullion-shipments. The smelter had shipped only twice since the trouble started. Both times the stage had been stopped, its boot emptied, the driver and guard killed. Llano was sure of only one thing; the man who had betrayed Morley was working for someone higher up, someone with money and power living here in the obscurity of this wide open boom-town.

Wheeling the team down off the smelter-grade and into the road, Llano took a last look back at the half-lit street. Even this late the walks at the town's center were packed. The four saloons hadn't once shut their doors during the eight months of this boom; nor had there been any break in the endless string of ore-wagons coming down off the hill behind the town to the smelter.

The diggin's had already turned out half a hundred fortunes. One of those fortunes should have been Llano's, for he had been the first in and had worked the stage-concession from the beginning on the line to Butte. He had started with four Barlow-Sandersons and fourteen teams, barely enough equipment to handle the heavy traffic, and had made good money for six months. Then the raids had started, night raids on one out of every three stages that took the twisting road down out of the hills. In sixty days Llano had paid out nine thousand of his own money in damages to customers and for a week now had op-

erated only one of his four coaches. Bob Morley had lost fourteen thousand dollars in the same length of time, for Llano didn't insure bullion. If tonight's trip failed Morley would have to let the smelter go, Llano would have to sell out to the highest bidder.

He found Pat's team and buckboard a dozen rods up the faintly-marked fork that cut from the road directly below town. It took him twenty minutes to unhitch his three teams and lead them down into a grassy draw below the forks and stake them out for the night. Then, ignoring the stage and the load in its boot, he climbed to the seat of Pat Sewell's buckboard and drove back to town. He felt once for the Greener, found it on its rack under the seat.

BOB MORLEY'S frame house was at the town's outskirts, two hundred yards in from the smelter. There was hardly enough light tonight to distinguish a man's outline at fifty feet. For that reason Llano turned the team in at the hitch-post in front of the house, making no attempt to hide his coming.

As he took the last step up onto the porch, a low rich voice spoke from the shadows along the far railing: "It's you, Llano! I thought you'd gone."

The sound of that voice was something that always quickened Llano Ackers' interest, as it did now. It made him hurry his soft Texan's drawl a trifle as he answered, " 'Evenin', Mary. You're up late."

"I'm the reason, Llano," came a deeper-noted voice that Llano immediately identified as Ray Waldron's.

Llano was more irritated than surprised at finding the saloon-owner here this evening. Each time he saw Ray Waldron call at the Morley house, each time he saw the man with Mary on the street, his irritation deepened until now he admitted that he hated Waldron for his own reasons. Llano had little use for an arrogant man; he had less use for one whose taste ran to varying shades of broadcloth, spotlessly clean white shirts and fancy-stitched beaded boots. Waldron was arrogant and his expensive outfits constantly reminded his acquaintances of a lacking in theirs.

Waldron owned the *Paradise Club,* and pointed to it with pride as being one of the town's most respectable businesses. It wasn't a wide-open saloon and didn't cater to the men who frequented Lode's other liquor parlors. It was located in a building on the town's single cross-street, well away from the constantly thronged neighborhood of the stores. It had no swing-doors, no painted sign to proclaim the nature of the establishment. Its single door was of plate-glass, painted a dark green, unlighted.

Inside were three main rooms. Immediately inside the door was a luxurious red-and-gold furnished parlor where patrons could take their ease; back of that was the bar-room, the bar of gold gilt, mirrors lining the walls, upholstered chairs spaced at proper intervals along the walls; the rear room was Waldron's gambling casino, the chief source of his income. Back there a man could play any gambling game known and for stakes as high as he wanted to name. No common miner from the diggin's above town had ever seen the inside of the *Paradise.* Mine-owners, speculators, business-owners and an assortment of splendidly dressed women were Waldron's patrons. It was a quiet, orderly, magnificent establishment.

Studying Waldron now, Llano found that he disliked even the man's looks. The short thickset body didn't fit the arrogant bearing; the smile Waldron's square face took on as he came up to Llano and thrust out a hand wasn't a cordial one.

"Congratulate me, Llano," Waldron said. "Mary has just said 'yes'."

His words laid a coolness along Llano Ackers' nerves. Now that the news he'd been long expecting was put into words, Llano found it hard to say, "You're a lucky man, Waldron." He found it even harder to return the firm pressure of the man's grip.

MARY MORLEY came up and stood behind the man of her choice. "I'm lucky, too," she said, but her voice didn't carry conviction.

Llano stared at her intently, relying on the darkness to hide the sharpness of his scrutiny. Mary's oval face was set in a smile but not the open smile of a girl happy in the presence of the man she loves. Llano understood several things in that brief moment, chief of which was the girl's reason in consenting to marry Waldron. Two months ago, when the trouble had begun, Bob Morley had needed money, needed it badly. There was no bank in Lode and the one at Butte had refused to make him a loan until he could guarantee safe delivery of bullion down out of the hills. Unable to do that, Morley had accepted Waldron's offer of money. The two raids on the bullion stages since then had wiped out any chances of repaying that loan immediately; Mary was taking this way out, and knowledge of what she was doing lessened Llano's respect for her father more than he cared to admit.

Llano was suddenly impatient to get away from here. "Go in and tell Bob I'm ready," he said to Mary, his voice sharper-edged than he liked. "Tell him we'll load out front." He watched her as she turned and went in at the door, noting that her step didn't have its customary lithe quickness. It bore the same lifeless quality of her expression of a moment ago.

"That's taking a chance, Llano," Ray Waldron said. "You might be seen."

"I'll risk it." Llano immediately understood that Waldron knew of their plans for the delivery of the bullion, grudgingly admitting that the man had a right to know. So he added as explanation, "I want to get down-canyon as fast as I can and hit the Finger Rocks before they're expectin' the stage. That's where the trouble usually happens."

"I wonder who 'they' are," Waldron said, reminding Llano of the mystery that lay behind the sudden recent raids of the unknown band of night riders.

The door opened and Bob Morley's stooped figure showed in the opening. "They're in the front room here, Llano," he said, with a nervous laugh. "That pig-iron we loaded onto the stage sure fooled the boys."

Llano stepped into the room's heavy darkness and from close to one side of him Morley said, "Here, on the floor." Llano leaned over and felt the stack and lifted one of the heavy bars of bullion and carried it out across the porch and down the steps.

Ray Waldron said, "Let me help," and he and Morley followed Llano out to the buckboard, each carrying a blanket-wrapped bar of the precious yellow metal.

There were five bars of the gold alloy, worth five thousand apiece. When they were finally loaded, Bob Morley said, "I'll drag a couple bales of alfalfa from the shed out back if you say, Llano."

Llano shook his head. "Wouldn't look right. They're pretty well hidden."

He climbed to the seat, and was picking up the reins when Mary came to stand below him at the wheel-hub. She reached up a hand, laid it lightly on his arm, and said softly, "Good luck, Llano."

Something balled up Llano's throat and he couldn't answer. A lot depended on this trip to Butte tonight, more than

any of them cared to admit. The thinly drawn temper within Llano abruptly cut loose. He said tersely, "I'll be all right," and flicked the reins to set the team into motion.

HIS picture of Mary Morley's expression back there on the porch rode with him for almost five miles of that twisting down-canyon road. Once he had thought of the girl in the way Ray Waldron was thinking of her now, as being the one woman he'd ever ask to be his wife. All that was gone now. That look had somehow robbed Mary of her beauty of even feature and deep brown eyes; it had made a mocking mask of the girl's face, and remembering it Llano Ackers felt something deep inside him turn cold and hard at the knowledge of the sacrifice she was making.

The trail ran out across the canyon's first broad valley and out beneath the spreading branches of a huge cottonwood. He was too intent on his thoughts to catch even a hint of the shadow that suddenly swung down out of the low branches of that cottonwood as the buckboard ran beneath. His first warning was the sudden lurch of the buckboard's springs taking up a man's falling weight. It was sheer instinct that made him drop the reins, stab his right hand toward holster, and turn on the seat.

He was too late. The man crouching behind was already swinging his six-gun in a merciless, down-chopping stroke. The weapon's barrel laid a vicious blow along Llano's temple. White sheets of light blinded him as he slumped backward off the seat. He tried to move, couldn't, and the last thing he heard as the team slowed to an abrupt stop was the sound of high-pitched laughter and a man's rasping voice calling, "Come and get it!"

When he was finally conscious of the throbbing pain in his head, Llano thought that it was only seconds later, that the glare of light behind his closed lids was a fading out of the first blinding flash of the blow. He opened his eyes finally and saw that it was day.

He lay face up in the bed of the buckboard. His hand went to his swollen temple and came away sticky with half-dried blood. It took all his strength to sit up and brace himself against the sudden dizziness that sent his senses reeling. As soon as he could focus his eyes he looked off to the left, saw Pat Sewell's team of browns grazing a few rods away across the valley floor, close to the fast-running stream that followed the canyon down out of the hills. Beyond, hugging the far slope of the valley's steep side, ran the light gravel grade of the road.

Llano crawled along the short length of the vehicle's bed, eased himself over the end-gate, and tried to stand. When he found he couldn't he went to his knees and crawled the thirty yards to the banks of the stream. The sharp coldness of the water steadied him, relieved his hot thirst. After five minutes he could stand without weaving on his feet.

The bullion was gone, he had his guns, Pat's Greener was slung under the seat, and no evidence remained of what had happened beyond the fresh scar made by a rowelled spur showing on one of the sideboards.

Llano couldn't even think; there was nothing to think about. He pushed the team hard all the way to town. Bob Morley wasn't in his office at the smelter. No one answered his knock at the house's front door. He headed for the sheriff's office.

As he turned Pat's team in at the tie-rail before the jail and saw the group on the walk that eyed him so soberly, he knew something was wrong. Harry Ross, the printer, was one of that

group, alongside the jail-office door. Stepping up onto the walk, Llano asked, "What's drawin' the crowd, Harry?"

Ross's bleakness of countenance didn't soften as he replied with surprising curtness, "You'll find out soon enough!"

LLANO opened the jail-office door and walked in, and broke his motion of closing the door before it was completed. Sheriff Bart Niven, standing in front of his desk alongside Spencer, his deputy, jerked the gun he held in his hand a bare inch, saying flatly, "Close it, Llano, close it! It's too late to run!" Then as Llano slowly closed the door, the law man nodded to Ray Waldron, standing to one side of the door. Waldron shrugged with a gesture of helplessness as Llano's glance swung around to regard him; he stepped in and lifted Llano's gun from its holster.

"He's wearin' one at his shoulder, too," Spencer said. "Get it, Ray." Waldron reluctantly relieved Llano of his second weapon.

Llano saw Mary and her father a second later as his eyes grew accustomed to the thick-walled room's semi-darkness. Bob Morley was seated in a chair in a far corner of the room alongside the steel door that closed off the jail. The oldster's face was drawn and pale, and he looked at Llano with a hurt showing deep in his blue eyes. Mary's look was like that, only that in her glance was the faint bright quality of anger.

"Llano," she said abruptly. "Tell them you didn't do it!"

Llano's curiosity was alive now, along with a deep cold anger that made him look squarely at the sheriff and drawl, "You think I'd be fool enough to try and pack out o' here with five bars of bullion?"

"That's a thought," Niven drawled, noncommittally. "Only I can't see why you came back."

"Easy, Sheriff," Ray Waldron said. "Llano's entitled to explain."

"There's nothin' to explain," Llano said, trying to keep his tones even. "All I remember is that whoever did it dropped out of the branches of that cottonwood in the upper valley. Caught me before I could move. He did this with his plow-handle." . . . Llano raised a hand to the lump at his temple. . . . "As I went out I heard him call to someone. I even forget what he said." He waited, seeing instantly that his words brought no flicker of response in the sheriff's hard glance. All at once his anger let go: . . . "You're a pack of fools if you think I framed this! I . . ."

"So the bullion's gone, eh? What about Pat Sewell?" Bart Nevin was thin-faced, gray-mustached, and now his gaunt visage was granite-like in unyielding soberness. "What about that fight you and Pat had yesterday? What about his quittin' you last night?"

Llano jerked his head up, looked first at Mary and then at her father, trying to catch by their expression something that would explain the lawman's questions. He could read nothing, and asked quickly, "What about Pat?"

In answer, the sheriff turned and picked a shiny bit of yellow metal off his cracked-varnish desk. It was a five-dollar gold-piece with a hole through the center, the first money Llano had taken in on his new stage line, a lucky piece that never left his possession. Niven held it up between thumb and forefinger. "We found this in the ashes of Pat's fire. Pat fell onto his fire. It burned him pretty bad. Doc Moore says he wasn't dead when he fell. Maybe you can be glad at knowin' he was burned bad before he died. We aren't!"

IN a split-second's time Llano knew the meaning behind the sheriff's

words, that Pat was dead, that he was being accused of murdering his friend. It took him only that brief interval to close his fists and lunge forward. The sheriff made a futile stab at the gun he'd holstered a moment ago. His hand was brushing the weapon's handle when Llano's fist caught him high on one cheek-bone. The force of the blow lifted the lawman's frail frame back across the desk. He crashed down hard onto his chair, the legs splintered and gave way, and he hit the floor on his shoulder-blades and skidded two feet along the boards until his head hit solidly against the wall. His legs moved feebly, once, before his whole frame went loose in unconsciousness.

Llano was around the desk in one stride, stooping to snatch the six-gun from the sheriff's holster. It swung up and lined at Spencer before the deputy's hand had lifted his weapon from holster. Ray Waldron, still holding Llano's guns in his hands, took care to stoop over and lay them on a chair alongside him.

"Mary," Llano said. "I want to know what's happened. Who found Pat, where was he found, and how was he shot?"

Mary's voice was steady, there was a gladness in her eyes as she answered quickly. "He was found by an Irishman, a miner, on his way to work this morning. He . . ."

"What name?" Llano asked. He had leaned across and now carefully lifted Spencer's gun from its holster and laid it on the desk. "The Irishman, Mary? What was his name?"

"Maher," she told him. "Barney Maher. He's working with Findlay on his claim."

"Go on."

"Pat was shot from behind with a forty-five," the doctor says. "He fell across his fire. I . . . I guess he was burned badly before he died . . ." Mary's voice broke a little, then steadied . . . "Llano, before you go, I want you to know I believe you. I know you didn't do this. Dad and I will always remember how you tried to help us."

Llano had a brief moment of wonder at Mary's knowing that he meant to break his way out of here, to shoot if necessary. Then he said, "Bob, I want to hear you say that, too. I want to be sure."

Bob Morley's words came slow and haltingly. "I've tried for the last hour to talk Niven out o' makin' this play. That's why we're here, Llano. He was gettin' ready to round up a posse."

Llano smiled thinly as he regarded Ray Waldron. His dislike for this man was alive now; he took a grim pleasure in seeing the man flinch as his weapon swung around to line at him. "You, Waldron . . .!" The banker gave a visible start of surprise . . . "You'll take over the smelter now? You close out on Morley?"

Ray Waldron shrugged, tried to look helpless, didn't quite manage it. "What else is there to do? A technicality I'll admit, but necessary."

Llano queried, "Technicality?"

"It'll stay in the family," Waldron told him.

Llano had forgotten Mary's promise of last night. Remembering it now sobered him instantly. He picked up Spencer's gun, rammed it in his belt, and drawled, "Keep off the street for the next two minutes. I'm goin' to steal a horse and there may be trouble for anyone tryin' to stop me."

ON the way across to the door he picked up his two weapons from the chair behind Waldron, put them in their holsters. There was a scattered crowd out front. As Llano appeared the crowd broke in front of him and he was for the moment thankful that the

jail walls and door were thick enough to have blanked out any sound of what had happened inside.

He walked to the hitch-rail, took his pick of the four ponies tied there, and climbed into the saddle of a bay gelding. The stirrups were too short.

He was swinging out onto the street when a shout came from down the walk: "Stop him! That's my horse!"

Llano palmed the weapon from the holster at his thigh, bent low in the saddle as he drove in his spurs. A second later the throaty roar of a shot cut loose behind and a bullet kicked up dust twenty feet further along the street.

That single shot was the only one that followed Llano down the street. In another two seconds an angle between the false-fronted buildings hid him from the crowd at the jail. At the edge of town, the bay at a fast trot, he waved to the driver of an ore-wagon and the man called out as he passed, "Nice mornin', Llano."

Back from Bob Morley's house after a futile wait to hear from the sheriff's posse that was searching for Llano, Ray Waldron unlocked his office, entered it, and locked the door after him.

His polished mahogany desk and swivel-chair to match had been freighted into Lode from 'Frisco along with the rest of the *Paradise's* furnishings, and now he took the chair, reached for a cigar and lit it. As he leaned back, inhaling the richness of the pure Havana tobacco, a slow, satisfied smile widened the line of his thick lips. That smile stayed there until the knock sounded at his door.

He rose, crossed the room unhurriedly, and without opening the door, called, "Who's there?"

A muffled voice answered, "Me," and Waldron pushed back the bolt and swung the panel open.

Sheriff Bart Niven stepped in quickly, closing the door and bolting it. He turned to Waldron and said gruffly, "This isn't so good, Ray. Someone might see me."

"What of it?" came Waldron's crisp query. "We're tryin' to get that bullion back, aren't we?"

Niven's frown broke to a smile as he nodded. The smile was short-lived. "He's gone. We hung onto the sign as far as that bald rock two miles above. There's a hundred ways a man could take out of there."

"HE'S as good gone as dead," Waldron said. "Forget him."

The law man shook his head, slowly, deliberately. "I ain't so sure." His hand came up to gingerly touch the red mark of the bruise along his high cheekbone. "Any gent that'll make a play like he did back there at the jail don't forget easy. He may be back."

"It won't do him any good." Waldron took another long pull at the cigar. "The Wells-Fargo man arrives tonight. Get that lawyer busy on that title for the equipment. By tonight I want clear title to everything Llano Ackers brought in here, teams, coaches, his lease on the station. I can't do my business any other way."

"How you goin' to guarantee Wells-Fargo that their stages won't have the same trouble Llano's did?"

"Niven, a man without brains wouldn't have come as far as I have. Didn't you know that Llano was holdin' up his own stages? This was to be his last trip before he high-tailed from the country, a rich man. He's gone now, and I'll personally make good any losses Wells-Fargo has in makin' this run from Lode to Butte."

"Not bad," Niven conceded, his tight smile returning. "Not bad. Only I still say you've got to watch out for Llano. A couple weeks ago I saw him out-draw a gun-thrower from Wyomin'

—the one that got that broken wrist and spent two nights in jail before we shipped him out. Llano was shaded on that draw but made his play and beat this jasper. He's got guts and he's fast —dammed fast!"

Waldron laughed. "Guts, sure. But what good will they do him now? There's nothin' to prove on us. Tomorrow I leave for a trip to Denver. On the way out I head up Gunshot Canyon and dig up the bullion and put it in my trunk. At Denver I climb onto the Union Pacific. That friend of mine in St. Louis will be satisfied with a quarter split on the bullion and take it off our hands. I'll be back in ten days with your money and Spencer's. We can forget about Llano."

Niven rubbed his hands together, a greedy look in his eyes. "Then I can tell this law job to go to hell. This winds it up."

"And throw over the nicest set-up any two men ever had?" Waldron shook his head. "Hunh-uh, Bart. You play along with me and we'll try another thing or two. Remember, I own the smelter now. There's a few big mines that aren't usin' the smelter, one that may build one of its own. Between the two of us we ought to be able to show them how they'll make money usin' ours."

"How?"

Waldron shrugged, lifted his brows. "Who knows? Maybe their ore-wagons will have bad luck with broken axles. Maybe it'll be hard to get drivers when a few have had their hats shot off."

"I get it." Niven paused to consider. "As you say, Ray, make it worth my while and I'll wear this badge until the nickel wears off."

Waldron's glance went cold for a fleeting instant. "Was there ever a time when I didn't make it worth your while?"

Niven's look narrowed. He came over to stand by the desk, putting his two clenched fists on it, leaning toward Waldron as he said, "We don't need Spencer. His share's a tenth and he don't earn it. And I'm not so sure about him when he drinks. He talks."

"Then get rid of him."

"For his share?" The law man stared down at Waldron intently.

Ray Waldron had an understanding of understrappers acquired from long experience. They were good until they put too much value on their services. Bart Niven had had a fifth share of the proceeds from the two previous raids on Llano Ackers' stages; his wanting Spencer's tenth in addition to his own was all the evidence Ray Waldron now needed to convince him that Niven was going the way of all understrappers. Yet he gave no hint of what he knew as he answered easily, "Sure, handle Spencer before I leave tomorrow and you can have his tenth. That bullion will be worth thirty thousand to my friend in St. Louis. That's three thousand more for you. Play along with me, Bart, and we'll clean up more than these mine-owners before we pull out of this country."

AFTER Niven left, Waldron sat a long while in his chair, studying a pencil he turned idly in his fingers. When he finally tossed the pencil onto his desk he had decided on the man who would be Lode's new sheriff.

He was unusually affable that night as he ate his evening meal with Mary Morley and her father. After they left the table, Mary going to the kitchen to do the dishes, Bob Morley reluctantly brought up the thing that had been on his mind all day. He opened a drawer of the china-cabinet and took out a folded piece of paper, a pen and a bottle of ink. Coming back to take the chair alongside the one where Waldron sat,

he said, "Here's the title, Ray. I'll sign it over to you."

Waldron held up a protesting hand. "Not now, Bob. This can be taken care of any time. As I said this morning, it's a pure technicality."

"It's an obligation," Morley insisted, the worry showing in his eyes, in the deep wrinkles of his high forehead. "Your loan was for twenty thousand. The smelter cost me a little over thirty to build. We'll draw up a new title, giving me a third interest in the business. I'll stay on as Superintendent if you want." He uncorked the inkbottle, dipped the pen in it and held it out to the saloon-owner.

Waldron reached out and took the pen with a show of reluctance. "I don't want to do this, Bob. But if you'll feel better havin' it this way. . . ."

His words broke off as glass crashed inward at the window behind him. His thickset frame went rigid and he turned in his chair in time to see a hand holding a six-gun reach through the broken pane and thrust aside the curtain.

Abruptly, Llano Ackers' drawling voice spoke out, "I'll take that title, Waldron. Hand it across!"

"Llano!" Bob Morley came up out of his chair, his face pale and drawn. "Llano, this is a personal affair. Keep out of it!"

"I'll still take that title."

Ray Waldron's left side was toward the window. As Llano spoke, the saloon-owner's right hand slowly went in under his coat and raised toward the shoulder-holster he always wore at his left arm-pit.

Suddenly Llano's thumb drew back the hammer of his weapon. The gun exploded in a blasting concussion that made the flame of the lamp flicker. Waldron groaned and let his right arm fall, his left hand crossing to clench the fiery burn Llano's bullet had laid along his upper-arm. His rugged face drained of all color and he picked up the title and hurriedly handed it across. Llano's other hand showed in the window a moment as he reached in to take the folded sheet of paper. Then both hand and gun drew back out of sight.

Bob Morley stood there fascinated a brief moment before he ran for the front door. He threw it open, called loudly, "Llano!" but had his only answer in the abrupt hoof-drum of a running pony as it went fast down the road and out of town.

Mary was standing in the kitchen-doorway as her father came back in the door. He looked at her, saw with surprise that she was smiling. "That was Llano, wasn't it?" she asked.

RAY WALDRON muttered irritably, "There's a gun in the kitchen you might have used."

She smiled, and answered, "That wouldn't have been fair, Ray."

He was more worried than he cared to admit even to himself as he walked back to the *Paradise*. He could have a new title drawn up and recorded, but that would take time. The *Paradise* rooms were filling and it took him ten minutes to work his way back to his office, stopping several times on the way to talk to a few of his wealthier patrons.

Once in his office he pulled his coat off, rolled up his shirt-sleeve, and wrapped a clean handkerchief about the shallow bloody flesh-wound on his arm. Now was no time to call in Doc Moore. The medico would be too curious.

The cigar clenched between his teeth was burned down a bare inch when Bart Niven knocked at the door and ushered in a man he introduced as, ". . . Mister Baker of Wells-Fargo, Ray. He stopped me to ask the way to your place, so I brought him along myself."

The sheriff left, and as the door closed behind him, Baker said,

abruptly, "I'll make this as brief as possible, Waldron. I learned an hour ago that you today purchased the Ackers Stage Lines. I called on your lawyer, found your title clear and in order. But we aren't in the market for this run at the present time. So we're holding off."

"Because of the trouble we've been having?" Waldron said. Catching Baker's answering nod, he went on easily, "You know, of course, that Llano Ackers was robbing his own outfits, that . . ."

Baker's jaw-muscles tightened. "I know no such thing," he cut in. "But I do know Llano Ackers, met him down in Texas five years ago where he got his start . . . and his name. Do you happen to know, Waldron, how he got that name?"

The saloon-owner shook his head, sensing at once that he'd said the wrong thing.

Llano was the only man down there who'd take a stage across that neck of the Staked Plains . . . the *Llano Estacado* . . . between Cherokee and Antelope. The Comanches still take a scalp now and then down there. Llano Ackers got his name fightin' Comanches at damned slim pay. He's as honest as any man I know." . . . Baker shook his head. . . . "You're makin' a wrong guess, Waldron. Llano Ackers wasn't responsible for this trouble. We won't buy you out until you find out who is responsible."

Waldron was for the first time in his life speechless, caught without one idea that would carry his point, clinch this bargain he'd been framing for months. Baker, thinking the saloon-owner's silence came from embarrassment at having wrongly accused a man, said, "I'll wish you good-night. Let my Denver office know when this trouble clears up." He turned without further ceremony and left the office.

BARNEY MAHER'S tent was the fourth in line of the double row that flanked the line of the high bench above Lode, close to the diggin's. Barney was one of the less important citizens of this settlement someone had dubbed Little Ireland.

It was a week day and the last lantern in the tents winked out shortly after Llano tied his stolen bay gelding in a thicket of cedar after making the climb from Morley's house, an hour after dark.

He waited there twenty minutes longer, knowing that he was giving himself all the time necessary; these Irishmen put in a hard day's work and were quick, heavy sleepers. As he started down the slope, walking carefully, soundlessly, his right hand reached into the pocket of his levis and touched the folded sheet of paper. Remembering how Ray Waldron's hand had shaken as he handed the smelter title across brought a thin smile to Llano's lips, an amused look to his grey eyes.

He came down directly behind Barney Maher's tent and was careful as he stepped between the guy-ropes. As his right hand palmed the heavy Colt's .45 from its holster at his thigh, his left went out to lift up the canvas drop. He reached in and felt the side-bar of Barney's cot at the precise instant the Irishman's bulk stirred restlessly and he jerked awake. Llano stepped into the tent, rammed his weapon into Barney's ribs and drawled softly, "Quiet, Barney!"

Maher's voice grated in a harsh whisper, "Bud what be yer . . ."

"Outside!" Llano said softly, reaching down to lift the drop alongside him. He could make out Maher's shape in the darkness now. "Get down and crawl, Barney. And careful! I'm nervous with a hog-leg!"

Three minutes later Barney stood with half-raised hands alongside the

bay at the cedar-thicket up the hill above the tents. Llano, two paces away, was rolling a cigarette. When he finished he offered Barney the makin's. "Smoke?"

Now that Llano's gun was holstered, the man's nerve was coming back. "Smoke be damned!" he flared. "Ye'll tell me what ye're about!"

"About this mornin', Barney. About findin' Pat."

"And what about thot?"

"You work at Findlay's diggin's. The spot where you found Pat this mornin' isn't on the way from here to Findlay's. Were you out for an early mornin' walk, Barney?"

"As if 'twas any o' yer damn' business! I'll have me partners beatin' the bush for the likes of ye in another minute."

Llano's reach for his six-gun was a deceptively lazy gesture. But it swung up so fast that Barney didn't have quite the time to get his hands down. "I could lick you one-handed, Barney, but I haven't the time. Tell me how you happened to find Pat this mornin' or I'll let the wind out of your guts with all five of these slugs." As he finished, he cocked the gun, the hammer-click sounding audibly in the stillness.

Barney Maher's Irish blood was his only claim to courage. Just now his upraised hands trembled visibly. "Be swingin' that off me, Llano," he said, his tone frantic. "'Twas a shame about Pat. And 'twill do me heart good to name ye the man that paid me fifty dollars to go find him. Niven, it was. Him that wears the sheriff's star. And I say he's no damned good!"

LLANO spent a good ten seconds letting this unexpected news settle in his mind. In his eight months' stay in Lode he'd developed a healthy dislike for the lawman. Niven was a close-mouthed, sour, surly individual, yet here was the first proof Llano had ever had of the lawman being dishonest. This afternoon he'd thought back over every detail of last night's happenings and decided that Ray Waldron was the only man aside from himself, Mary and Bob Morley who had known that the bullion was being taken out in Pat Sewell's buckboard. Now, to have this proof against Bart Niven link him with Waldron took Llano a little closer to discovering who had murdered Pat Sewell.

"Can you ride a horse, Barney?" he asked the Irishman. "Can you ride from here down to Butte in time to be on the mornin' stage for Pueblo?"

"Be tellin' me why I should give up me job with Findlay?"

"Because by mornin' the sheriff will know you've talked. If I was him I'd frame Pat's murder on you."

Barney Maher's jaw slacked open, then snapped shut. He swallowed with difficulty, saying hoarsely, "Ye'd frame me with that?"

"Not me, but Niven. You can take your choice, Barney. Either come down to the livery barn with me and steal a horse and leave, or take your chances of outfightin' your own mob. Pat knew half the men in this camp. They liked him. They'll hang the man that shot him."

Barney let out his breath in a gusty sigh. "And I was makin' me good wages, too," he said. There wasn't any more fight in him. He walked down the steep trail to the town never once looking back at Llano, who rode a few feet behind. Llano helped him let down the bars at the back of the feed-barn corral, helped him cinch tight a saddle they found on a rack inside the broad maw of the barn's open back door.

As the Irishman swung up into the saddle, Llano said, "They still hang a man for stealin' a horse in this country, Barney. That makes you guilty

on two counts. You'd better hurry."

Barney hurried, circling the street until he reached the downgrade of the road well beyond town. Llano's bay was a fast horse but the animal had a hard time keeping Barney in sight the three miles Llano rode to make sure his bluff had carried.

Llano rode back to Lode, climbed his bay well up onto the bench where sprawled the tents of Little Ireland, then tied the animal well back in the cedars before he took the path downward that led to the town's main street. He pulled his stetson low over his eyes crossing the main thoroughfare to take the unlighted side-street and walk down it to a point opposite the *Paradise*. He paused there, considering how he could get inside the place and back to Ray Waldron's office without being discovered, for he had made up his mind to see Waldron tonight, to get the truth out of him.

He had smoked down a cigarette and had flicked it out onto the street, about to cross to the *Paradise's* front door and trust to luck, when that door opened and the light from inside was thrown strongly on the face of a man who stepped out. Llano knew that face, remembered it; and immediately a curiosity as to the reasons for this man's presence here took a hold on him.

HE had known Abner Baker down in Texas, well enough to know that Baker wasn't the kind to frequent a place like the *Paradise,* nor the kind to have dealings with a man like Ray Waldron. He quickly decided that his own business with Waldron could wait, and crossed over and followed Baker along the walk almost to the corner of the main street before he called out, "Baker!"

The Wells-Fargo man stopped, turned, his hand sliding in at his waist beneath his coat. But when the shadowy figure behind announced, "It's me, Llano Ackers," Baker's hand came empty from behind his coat and his long face took on a pleased smile and he exploded, "I'll be damned!"

They shook hands and Baker's face sobered abruptly. "What's this I hear about your bein' in trouble?"

"Can you find a place where we can talk alone?"

Baker said, "I'm at the Mountain House, room fourteen. Meet me there in five minutes."

Llano used the hotel's back stairs, coming in along the alley. His soft knock on the door of room 14 was immediately answered and he stepped inside without being seen.

Baker took off his coat, threw it on the bed, and said, "I'm glad I saw you. What's Waldron got up his sleeve?"

Llano shrugged. "You tell me."

"He's offered to sell Wells-Fargo your Stage line for twenty thousand, cash. I came here to buy it but things didn't smell so good."

For a moment Llano was speechless, hearing this news for the first time. He had known, of course, that his small business would immediately be sold by the sheriff as an outlaw's property. But the suddenness of the thing, the fact that Waldron was the buyer and had taken less than a day to make his purchase, was what struck him. That, and Baker's being here by prearrangement to buy the stage line from Waldron, was the final proof that convinced Llano of the saloon-owner's guilt.

He told Baker as much as he knew, beginning with the first robbery of one of his stages two months ago, the killing of both driver and guard and the disappearance of a mine-payroll. He told of his difficulty in getting men to work for him until Pat Sewell was the only one loyal enough to stick with him, and finally of his argument with Pat yester-

day afternoon.

"About last night," Baker said. "Waldron knew how you were to take the gold out?" Llano supplied all the details.

Baker sat without speaking a long moment; finally his glance narrowed shrewdly and he said, "Waldron couldn't have cleared his title to your outfit if he hadn't had the sheriff's help. And you know definitely that Niven paid that Irishman to find Sewell. That lines him up pretty well alongside Waldron all the way through.

"But for a sheriff to . . ." Llano abruptly checked his words as he heard the sound of upraised voices coming below, from in front of the nearest saloon, two doors below the hotel.

A man down there suddenly called in a whiskey-thickened voice, "Clear out o' my way or damn' if I won't whip in your thick skull, Spencer!"

THEN a voice Llano recognized as Deputy Sheriff Milo Spencer's shouted stridently, "Someone give me a hand with this gent! He's drunk and he might . . ." Other voices, raised in alarm, muted the deputy's words. But something in the high-pitched quality of Spencer's voice fanned alive a spark of memory within Llano.

Abruptly he smashed one fist into his other open palm, drawling, "Baker, I've got something! The gent that gun-whipped me under that cottonwood last night was the sheriff's deputy."

"That's a guess, Llano," Baker said. "You told me you didn't recognize the voice."

"Listen!" Llano said. Once more Spencer's voice sounded above the others, boots scuffled along the plank walk below the window and suddenly the commotion ceased. "That was Spencer arrestin' a drunk. He yelled a minute ago, and that voice was the same one I heard last night. I'm sure of it, Baker!"

"Then there's at least three of them in on it. With the law on Waldron's side, you'll have a poor chance of provin' anything."

Llano leaned forward in his chair, eyeing his friend soberly. "Spencer and at least one other man stopped me last night. It's not like Bart Niven to trust a gold shipment worth thirty thousand dollars to a deputy who might jump the country with it. I'll lay my bet that Niven was the one with Spencer last night."

"And if he was?" Baker queried.

"They both know where the bullion was hidden. Baker, Niven's goin' to doublecross his deputy tonight."

"I don't get it, Llano."

"Get a sheet of paper and a pencil and write what I tell you," Llano said.

Milo Spencer had his hands full with the drunk he arrested at the saloon below the hotel. The man hadn't had enough whiskey to loosen his muscles, and he fought all the way to the jail. When he was finally locked in his cell, Spencer knew he'd been working. He went into the jail-office, turned down the lamp, and rolled a cigarette, glad to rest tilted back in the sheriff's chair, his feet on the desk. He'd have to wait here now until Bart Niven came back.

He'd had only an hour's sleep last night, it was already an hour past the time he usually turned in, and he was sleepy and comfortable. He threw the cigarette into the cuspidor alongside the desk, wanting to make sure it wouldn't fall out of his hand and burn a hole in his shirt, and then he let his chin sag comfortably onto his chest. He was asleep in two minutes.

Llano found him that way. The street door was ajar, the hinges didn't squeak as he pushed it open, and the wide planks of the floor were solid enough so that no sound gave away his step as he crossed the room and laid

Baker's printed note in front of the sleeping deputy, full in the glare of the lamp.

OUTSIDE, from across the street, Llano threw the broken half of a worn mule's shoe straight through the front jail window. He had stepped into the sheltering darkness of an alleyway between two buildings even before the glass across the way shattered loudly and fell to the walk.

The six-inch length of iron came through the window and hit Spencer a glancing blow on the thigh. It jerked him into instant wakefulness and his boots hit the floor with a thud as he lunged up out of his chair with hand lancing toward his holstered six-gun. Standing there with the weapon at his hip, staring stupidly at the broken window, he made a figure so ridiculous that he realized it and finally holstered his .45 and growled, "Why can't they let a man alone!"

Then he saw the sheet of paper on the desk. His scalp tingled as he read the poorly printed words: *You and Waldron watch Niven.*

At that precise instant Spencer recognized Bart Niven's boot-tread on the plank walk outside. Frantic in his haste, he crumpled the paper and dropped it down the lamp chimney. The flame went ragged, smoked, but finally the paper caught and burned to an ash.

Niven came in, closed the door, and only then saw the glass-shards scattered along the floor. He looked at Spencer and the deputy said, "I got one of 'em locked in that back cell. His friends is outside."

"One what?"

"Drunk. They cut loose a half hour ago at the *Bull's Head*. Where were you?"

The truth of the matter was that Niven had gone from the *Paradise* to pay a call on a lady. So now he growled, "Where I was is none o' your business!" and fanned into flame the spark of suspicion the scrap of paper had a moment ago raised in Spencer's mind.

The deputy said, "I'll clean up this mess in the mornin'," and went out the door, taking care to keep his eye on the sheriff and not expose his back. He looked back over his shoulder all the way along the shadowed awninged walk until he came to the side-street and turned into it and headed for the *Paradise*.

Waldron's thin-drawn temper was plainly evident as Spencer came into the office. The saloon-owner's arm was hurting from the crease of Llano's bullet; it hung in a cumbersome sling Waldron had made by tying two handkerchiefs together.

His fleshy, square face was set in a hard frown, and as Spencer closed the door he snapped out, "I told you never to come here!"

"Boss, I had to," Spencer said, holding up a hand to check the saloon-owner's protest. "Listen, and see if I didn't." And he told Waldron of the note, what it had said, how it had been delivered while he was asleep.

Waldron's frown slacked off and his two cold blue eyes became narrow-lidded. "Who wrote it?"

"It was printed."

Waldron was silent a moment. At length his clenched fist banged the desk-top. "Someone's workin' with Niven. You know what this means, Spencer?"

THE deputy shook his head, a little awed by the magnificence of the room, the confidential tone Waldron was using with him.

"Niven spoke about gettin' rid of you this mornin'," Waldron went on, seeing that his words instantly brought a tide of color to Spencer's face. "I

talked him out of it. Now it looks like he's out to hog all that bullion. Spencer, can I trust you?"

"I'll go back there now and blow his face in."

Waldron was a shrewd judge of a man. He was keen enough to be sure now that Milo Spencer meant what he said, that he could trust the man with anything. "That's the wrong way to do it, Spencer. The bullion comes first. The jasper that left that warning on your desk is probably the one Niven wanted to hire to bushwhack you and me. Maybe he's a friend of ours and turned Niven down. Tonight you're to take a pack-horse and ride up Gunshot. Dig up the bullion and bring it here and we'll put it in my safe here in the office. You can come up the alley and hand it in through the back window, then you and me are goin' to pay our call on Niven! Tomorrow you'll be Lode's sheriff!"

"He's mine, boss," Spencer breathed, hot hate showing in his glance. "I've thought for a long time he'd some day do this. I want to see a slug from my cutter spill his brains out of that thick skull!"

"He's yours all right," said Waldron, with an inscrutable smile, "after you've made that ride down Gunshot. I'll give you two hours."

When Spencer came out of the *Paradise,* Llano was hidden well in the shadow of a building across the street. He followed the deputy to the feed barn, was even close enough to the doors to hear Spencer say to the hostler inside, "Throw my hull on my roan, Tip, and put a pack-saddle on one of your lugheads. And make it fast."

Llano read his own meaning into the deputy's words and walked the nearest way to the bench-trail and climbed it to where he had tied his stolen bay gelding. Circling above the town and then sloping down into the canyon-road, he knew he had to make a guess as to where Spencer was riding tonight. He kept the bay at a run, knowing that Spencer was in a hurry; he covered the five up-and-down miles to the cottonwood that over-hung the trail in little more than half an hour.

He made his guess from there, crossing the broad floor of the valley and working back toward Lode. Half a mile back along the gradual up-grade brought him to the narrow mouth of Gunshot Canyon, an off-shoot of this broad valley.

He waited there, and was well hidden in a growth of scrub-oak when the hoof-slur of Spencer's fast-trotting horse echoed out from this near side of the valley. He clamped a hand over the bay's nostrils in time to keep the animal from nickering a warning and giving away his presence. And he was close enough to the twisting narrow entrance of Gunshot to make out Spencer's shadowy form as he rode past.

MANY times on the way down the road to Butte, Llano had studied the sloping walls of the canyon as it broadened to make these wide valleys. Its rim towered too high to leave a way out at the head of these narrow box-canyons that were off-shoots of the larger one. So now he felt fairly certain that Milo Spencer would have to ride back this way in leaving Gunshot.

Spencer did ride out of the mouth of that narrow defile twenty minutes later. Llano, less than twenty feet to one side of the opening, let go his grip on the bay's nostrils when he saw the bulk on the back of the pack-horse the deputy was leading.

His bay snorted, and as Spencer's bulk went rigid in the saddle, Llano drawled, "Reach, Milo!"

Spencer was a bull-headed man. He jerked on the reins, rammed his spurs into his roan's flanks. But the animal

had taken only one stride when Llano's .45 bucked. Spencer's hat whirled from his head and fell to the sandy ground.

No man but a fool would have taken chances against a gun in the hands of a man who could throw a bullet with the accuracy Llano had shown. Spencer was no fool. He reined the roan to a standstill and raised his hands.

"That's more like it," Llano drawled, stepping in close and reaching up to relieve the deputy of his single holstered six-gun. "You were takin' the bullion back to Waldron, weren't you, Milo?"

"You'll play hell findin' out!" Spencer growled.

Llano stepped back alongside the pack-horse, pulled aside one corner of the dirt-smeared blankets to catch the reflected glint of star-light from one of the shiny bars of bullion before he said, "Climb down, friend!"

Spencer knew what was coming, yet was powerless to avoid it. Years ago Llano had learned the timing and sureness of a blow struck with a six-gun barrel that can knock a man into unconsciousness without crushing his skull. He had never hit a man from behind and didn't do it now. He drew his left hand Colt's, feinted a blow with it. Spencer dodged, and the down-striking gun in Llano's right fist caught the deputy as surely as though he'd been standing motionless. His knees buckled and he went down.

Forty minutes later Llano was knocking at the door of Bob Morley's frame house at the outskirts of Lode. He had to wait for a good ten seconds before a lamp's light flickered on inside. The door opened and Bob Morley stood there with the lamp in his hand, his jaw slacking open when he saw Llano with Spencer's bulk thrown across his shoulder.

"Get your light away from the door," Llano said quickly, stepping inside.

He eased Spencer's limp frame to the floor as Morley swung the door shut. In the dim glow of the lamp Llano looked across the room and saw Mary standing in the doorway to the bedroom, a quilted robe wrapped tightly about her slender body, a rifle held in her two hands. Sight of the rifle brought a smile to Llano's lean face. "You aren't takin' any chances with me, are you?"

Bob Morley said, "See here, Llano! You know what you're doin' but I don't. First you bust in a window and run off with the deed to the smelter, now you lug a dead man in here." The oldster's glance fell to the figure on the floor. His breath came in a quick gasp. "Goddlemighty, it's Spencer!"

LLANO stepped over to lean down and lift the deputy's frame from the floor and ease it into a rocker. He turned to Mary. "We'll need a bucket of water to bring him to. Between us, we have to make him talk." The girl and her father exchanged surprised glances, but Mary went to the kitchen and returned with a pail of water.

A minute later, Spencer caught his breath, gasped, and his eyes fluttered open as Llano threw the first dipperful of water squarely into his face. His eyes at first stared vacantly around him; then he saw Llano and his glance took on a look of mingled hate and stubbornness.

Llano said quietly: "Bob, I caught Spencer comin' out of Gunshot Canyon with your bullion laced to the back of a pack-horse. Earlier tonight, Spencer was in the *Paradise* for a long talk with Ray Waldron. What's your guess?"

"The bullion!" old Bob Morley breathed. His wide open and staring brown eyes quickly became narrow-lidded in shrewdness. Suddenly he said, "Ray Waldron was the only one besides us that knew how that bullion

was bein' shipped last night!"

Llano was looking at Spencer. "Milo, an hour ago I had a talk with Barney Maher. He told me . . ."

Spencer all at once lunged up out of his chair, his arms swinging wildly, one of his fists striking Llano on the shoulder. But the lean Texan's one striking blow caught the deputy full in the mouth, knocked him back down into the chair with such force that one of the black rungs gave way with a brittle crack. Spencer raised a hand and wiped it across his bloody lips, glaring up defiantly.

Llano went on, "Barney talked, told me how you paid him fifty dollars to take a walk this mornin' and find Pat's body."

"That's a lie!" Spencer flared, sitting erect in the chair, gripping the arms with hands white-knuckled. "Niven took care of that. I didn't have a thing to do with it." All at once he eased back in the chair, muttering, "So it was Barney that left the note, him that Niven tried to hire for the bushwhack!"

Llano said, "Maybe you'd like to tell us about it, Milo. We might go easier on you later."

For a brief moment he didn't know how well his frame-up had carried. But as Spencer's glance took on a look of cunning, as he could read the inner workings of the man's mind as he thought of Bart Niven, Llano knew he had won. In another moment the deputy was saying, "I'll talk. Damned if I'll take a rawhidin' and let those two off! It was Niven that shot Pat Sewell, him and me that took care of you down the canyon last night and buried the bullion up Gunshot. Waldron hired us, me for a tenth share, Niven for a fifth."

"How about the other times?" Llano queried. "How much has Waldron paid you for workin' for him in the last three months?"

Abruptly came the deputy's realization that he had talked too much. A mirthless smile now set across his rugged visage. "You'd like to know, wouldn't you?"

Llano straightened, looked across at Bob Morley. The smelter-owner's eyes were wide in obvious amazement. He was held speechless at what he had heard. Finally Llano said, "We'll have to tie him up until he can tell his story to a judge."

TEN minutes later Mary Morley's two lengths of clothesline bound Milo Spencer so tightly he couldn't move. At his first loud oath, Llano had tied a tight gag about his mouth. Spencer's face was now flushed with crimson deepened by his futile struggles against the stout rope.

Llano said, "Watch him until I get back," and went to the door and opened it.

"Llano! Wait!" Mary crossed the room and stood in front of him, her glance coming up to meet his. "I want you to know I'm sorry for what I did last night. But . . . it seemed like the only way out."

It may have been that this moment was the first in which Bob Morley fully understood the sacrifice his daughter had made in promising to marry Ray Waldron. For as her words ended he spoke from across the room, beginning, "I've been ten kinds of a fool, Sis . . ." and abruptly checking what he'd meant to say in the realization that neither Mary nor Llano had heard him.

The girl's glance as she looked up at Llano was filled with a tenderness old Morley had never before seen there. And Llano's grey eyes mirrored something of the girl's look; they were no longer slate-hard and inscrutable.

Mary said quietly, "You're going to the *Paradise* aren't you, Llano?"

He nodded, and that gesture brought a return of the granite-like quality to

his eyes.

"Will you be careful, Llano . . . for me?" she said, softly.

The thing that was in her eyes, the tenderness and the promise that lay behind her words, were things Llano Ackers knew he must ignore. This girl now, as never before, was infinitely desirable. Abruptly he knew that another moment with her would soften him beyond doing the task he'd set himself.

That was his reason for turning abruptly and going out the door and closing it behind him. All the way into town, until he turned into the side street toward the *Paradise,* Mary's image was a clear picture before him. Then, as he opened the saloon's plate-glass doors, he put all thought of her aside.

The *Paradise* was crowded. He made his way across the parlor inside the door, catching the surprised stares of several men who knew him, of ladies whose glances raised in surprised query at seeing his outfit of dusty levis, faded stetson and jingling spurs in these luxurious surroundings. He went through the wide doors into the bar-room, and came face to face with Bart Niven.

At sight of him, the lawman stopped with feet spread a little, hands at his sides, his fingers clawing slowly toward his guns. Llano took one step that put his back to the near wall and drawled, "Start it when you like, Bart!"

A hush had settled across these two rooms as people caught a hint of the violence that was shaping. The far door to the gambling room opened and Ray Waldron stepped through, not seeing immediately what was happening, but breaking his choppy stride when his glance finally crossed the room and settled first on Bart Niven, then Llano.

WALDRON spoke sharply, "Ed, get him!" The bartender took a step along the bar and reached a hand in under his counter.

Llano understood the apron's gesture. No one was expecting the flashing move of his right hand that smoothly palmed the Colt's out of its holster. His weapon swung out of its line with Niven and blasted its throaty roar once. The barkeep's shirt at the base of his neck split open and the mirror behind him suddenly spider-webbed as the bullet crashed into it. He straightened fast and threw up his hands, his shotgun under the bar forgotten.

The welling echo of that shot brought two sober-faced men in from the gaming-room at Waldron's back. One's hand had already brushed aside his coat from holster. But staring across into the blunt snout of Llano's gun he took his hand carefully away.

From a far corner of the room a woman's scream suddenly wiped out the awed hush that followed the gun's explosion. Llano drawled, "No one'll get hurt if they leave quietly."

It took less than thirty seconds for the room to empty, the front door in the parlor at Llano's back squeaking continually on its un-oiled hinges. When there was quiet out there, when Llano faced Bart Niven and Ray Waldron and the bar-keep and Waldron's two hired gun-hands, he said softly, "Now who's drawin' cards in this hand?"

Llano waited for the thing that didn't happen, the first move of one of the five for a gun. A sudden impatience took its hold on him; "I can't shoot a man who hasn't the guts to draw!" Even that brought no response.

A fragile, thin-backed chair stood alongside Llano. A thought made him pick it up with his left hand and throw it in a long arc that sent it crashing across the bar and into the expensive mirror behind.

Niven said, "Go ahead. Wreck the place and have your fun! You won't get out alive!"

Llano took two steps that put him

alongside the near end of the cherry-wood bar, drawling, "That's an idea, Bart." His gun levelled, he lifted one foot and put it against the inside corner of the long bar and pushed. The counter toppled outward, over-balanced, and fell slowly and with a sound of splitting wood, breaking glass.

"Still no takers," Waldron said. But Llano saw that his right arm was bent at the elbow, that his face was drawn and white, and that he was waiting for his chance. The apron, realizing what was shaping up, sidled across to the gaming-room door and disappeared through it.

LLANO caught the glint of reflected light from the barrel of his six-gun. That flash of color brought his attention up to the four-foot-wide crystal chandelier hanging at the center of the ceiling. It was suspended by a gilt chain. Llano was enjoying this destruction, knowing that every broken piece of these gaudy furnishings was the needed pin-prick to gall Ray Waldron into an open fight. So now he jerked up the barrel of his six-gun and thumbed a shot upward, the middle link of the chandelier-chain snapped in two.

The outer rim of the heavy falling ring of kerosene lamps caught Bart Niven on the shoulder, knocked him down. As he fell he reached for his gun, arched it up and fired a shot at Llano that went wild.

When Llano's gun swung around to cover the sheriff, Ray Waldron moved his hand up to his shoulder holster. The two men behind him lunged out of line, hands slamming toward their weapons.

Llano had barely time to line his gun before the sheriff's blasted out a second time directly at him. The slam of the bullet that took him low on one thigh spoiled his aim for the fraction of a second. Then his six-gun bucked in his hand and Bart Niven's head jerked inhumanly from the crush of the lead slug and a blue hole centered his temple as he fell to the floor.

The fifteen lamps of the chandelier burst as they hit the floor, throwing flaming kerosene in a rough six-foot circle across the fine carpeting. Against this sudden blaze, the only light in the room now, Llano Ackers had a quick glimpse of three guns flashing out of holsters, lining at him. He threw his long frame in behind the over-turned bar in time to feel the bullet-whip of Waldron's first shot along his right arm. Two more explosions cut loose to prolong that of Waldron's gun.

On the heel of that deafening triple concussion, Llano raised his head and six-gun above the protection of the thick cherry-wood counter. His one snap-shot knocked the man in front of Waldron back into the saloon-owner. Waldron pushed his gunman aside, knocking him to the floor, and was swinging his .45 into line as Llano lowered his head again.

The acrid odor of scorched wool filled the air a moment later as the rug started burning. The flickering light of the flames threw deceiving shadows along the far wall as Llano waited for the next shot, listening carefully into the abrupt stillness. Abruptly a hint of sound shuttled back along the planks of the bar and with it he was rolling toward the back wall, seeing the shape of Waldron's second gunman halfway the length of the bar, stepping toward him.

The man fired two quick shots at Llano's smoke-shrouded shape. One of the bullets chipped a floor-plank at his left elbow. The second plowed a two-inch gash along the bunched cap-muscle at his right shoulder. He stopped rolling when he lay against the wall and lifted his six-gun and aimed at the center of that killer's high shadow.

His gun's pounding explosion seemed to drive back that shadow. It stum-

bled awkwardly, the smoke thinned for an instant, and Llano saw the man go down, his clawed hands ripping open his shirt at his stomach.

A GLANCE of powder-flame showed in a far corner, the bullet of that shot fanning the air in front of Llano's face. Waldron was over there, momentarily hidden by the smoke and the flickering light of the mounting flames and smoke. Llano came to his knees and pushed against the wall, bracing himself against the numbness of his wounded leg, choking against the bite of the smoke-fogged air at his lungs. Ray Waldron was the only man that faced him now.

After that single answering shot of Waldron's, a quarter-minute silence dragged out interminably. Llano didn't move, staring across the flaming circle of rug and through the smoke trying to see Waldron.

Suddenly a lamp that had not been broken in the fall of the chandelier burst from the heat of the rug beneath it. In that sudden bright light Llano Ackers looked directly across the thirty-foot width of the room at Ray Waldron's dim outline.

Both men saw each other at the same instant, both swung their weapons into line at the same split-second. The flame-lance of Llano's .45 stabbed across to throw its line true with that of Waldron's. Llano felt the slam of a bullet along the right side of his chest; but the wall at his back held his tall frame steady and he thumbed the hammer of his gun until it was empty.

After the third shot Llano saw the flaming arc of Waldron's gun stab obliquely down at the floor. Then Waldron's squat shape was shortening as he doubled at the waist.

Llano heard the cries from the street five minutes later. He heard the crash of the glass at the front door as someone broke through without turning the knob. He had fallen to the floor, face down, and now he raised his empty gun and lined it at the outer-parlor doorway, letting it fall at sight of Bob Morley's frail shape appearing there. Then a wave of faintness hit him and he had only a hazy memory of leaning against Bob's shoulder and walking across the room.

They carried him to Doc Moore's office and laid him on the operating-bench the medico had a year ago freighted up from Denver. Mary Morley held the chloroform-soaked wad of bandage to his nose and he fought against the sickening sweetness of the drug until she said, "We have to do it, Llano. You have three bullets in you."

He came out of it toward morning, when the lamp in the medico's office had burned low and Mary was beginning to wonder which deep breath would be Llano's last.

THE first thing he saw as he opened his eyes was a hazy picture of the girl's face. Her image cleared and as he caught the tenderness of her expression he felt unsteadiness in his chest.

"It's all over now, Llano," the girl said. "I . . . I'm so proud of you."

He looked up at her and the unmasked quality in his glance made her face take on a rush of color and she said, "I'll get the doctor. He told me to wake him if there was any change."

She had half raised from her chair alongside the bed when his voice spoke its firm, soft drawl. "I don't need a sawbones now."

She understood the meaning behind his words, and instead of taking the chair again she sat on the edge of the bed and leaned down and came into his arms.

# *Satan's Six-Gun Prayer*

## By JOHN CODY

*Author of "Gun Orphan of the Wilderness Trails," etc.*

*A knuckled hand caught the man's narrowed chin at the point*

***Gun-evil was in the air, as old Holy Smoke had prophesied—and the claim to that Mariposa mine was Satan's own grub-stake!***

THE tensioned murmur swelling from the milling crowd lifted faintly to the slitted window of Mariposa's adobe jail. Curious, Holy Smoke stretched his bony legs over the iron bunk's edge, wiggled his bootless toes with a distasteful squint at his flock of corns, and then casually climbed atop the soap box to the barred window.

Whang-leather face pressed hard against the rusty bars, Holy slanted a glance below and spit forcibly into the street's yellow dust. Sadly, he wagged his bald old head flecked with clumps of kinky gray at the edges like a brush rimmed trail.

"Gold fever's got 'em," he grunted knowingly, and as an afterthought, "Money is the root of all evil. Amen."

"There's the prospectin' f o o l ! ''boomed an eagle-eyed puncher, catching sight of Holy's wrinkled face between the bars. A ringing cheer broke the sultry air. Holy Smoke grinned, thumbed his Bible painstakingly to a marked page and with no more ado broke forth with the Lord's word.

Sixty odd dusty summers Holy had waited for a congregation like this. No man ever preached a sermon with more vigor. Owlhoot gunnies, range-hard punchers didn't grin and walk away. And Holy Smoke wasn't a fool. He knew why. They were listening because he had walked into Hell's Horn saloon with a bag of gold dust, the likes of which Mariposa hadn't seen for years. It was Holy Smoke who was going to lead them to the strike—but Holy wasn't going anywhere in the adobe jail, not until Sheriff Knuckles Long said the word. And there was a little matter of explaining to be done about Jeff Fellows stolen Silver City rig which turned up on Holy's lop-eared burro.

A broad grin crisscrossed Sheriff Knuckles Long's angular face and settled finally to his square chin as he en-

tered Holy's cell. Quietly, he dropped on the bunk, listening intently to the old man's words.

Creaking drily, the aged box swayed precariously beneath Holy's stomping feet. Knuckles steadied the platform with his boot—but too late. With a splintering crash, Holy rocketed to the floor, the ragged prayer book flapping in his wake. Tenderly he retrieved it and nodded somberly to the man atop his bunk.

"The devil is at play," he cited with a frown arched towards the box.

For moments the two men faced each other. Knuckles reached out and gave him a hand. Grunting softly, Holy pulled himself onto the bunk, sighed and bit down eagerly on the other's offered plug. They chewed in silence, watching a bemuddled red fly zooming in and out of the slit window. Once it crow-footed onto Knuckles freckled nose, and he swung lustily, and missed. Undaunted, the fly winged past his ear, and Knuckles made a lunge for Holy's boots with the glint of death in his eye.

Swiftly, the old man pulled him down. "Thou must not kill," he said.

Knuckles swore softly wrinkling his nose. "You ring-tailed muskrat. You'd steal a dog's hind leg an' yuh come around stoppin' a man from killin' a pesky fly. Yuh come bustin' into Mariposa forked on a rustled rig while yuh're jeans is about bustin' with yaller dust." A glint of puzzlement stamped his features. "Holy," he went on sorrowfully, "I jus' ain't never gonna make yuh out."

Crossing his legs, Holy carved away at his corn. He didn't look up as he spoke. "Knuckles, I gotta get outa here an' file a claim at the county seat. It ain't for me, it's Ned Thompson's girl."

"Nell Thompson." Knuckles blurted out the name. There wasn't a man in Mariposa who didn't know the auburn-haired daughter of the man who disappeared into the bleak waste-land to the south and never came back.

It was Knuckles who fought to save the tottering Double Angle spread for Nell after her dad was gone, but to no avail. Drouth and rustlers ravaging the mesquite dotted lowlands had taken a deadly toll from the Double Angle spread. Stripped it to a few straggling head which went for a song at Ace Wells' foreclosure sale.

Nell could have saved the Double Angle for a price. "Yuh marry me, Nell," Ace had cited with beady eyes consuming her from blue eyes to the tips of her tiny feet, "an' yuh can have the Double Angle an' a couple o' other spreads thrown in."

Tiny chin protruding in a stubborn wedge, cheeks flushed red to the anger burning in her heart, she bit out her reply: "I'd starve first, Ace Wells."

"Knuckles Long," Ace grated throatily, "the jasper what run yore spread to the wall, an' yuh turnin' me down fer him. I calculate this range ain't big enough for us both."

A week had passed and as yet Ace had not made good his threat. But wise oldsters knew that Ace wasn't talking through his hat. Five years now he had run Mariposa town with his hireling gunnies spoiling for a taste of blood ever ready to jump to his command. And now, Mariposa's sandy-haired sheriff carried death's tag, number one on Ace's set of books—books which inevitably balanced to bucking guns.

KNUCKLES listened intently, a tautness snapping through his veins as Holy told his discovery. "Ned Thompson went out not mor'n a mile from water. I reckon he broke his leg fallin' off a butte in Buzzard's Gulch, an' jus' lay there an' died o' thirst. He warn't mor'n a pile o' bones when I come along, but I saw his busted leg.

"Never know'd who the gent was till

I got to goin' through his outfit. Then I discovers a map ol' Ned had scribbled 'fore he died tellin' the location of the diggin's." Sheepishly, he squinted at the other. "Yuh see, Knuckles," he said, "I never got to the mine. I jus' took the map an' ol' Ned's bag a gold dust an' hit for town."

Bitter resentment welled angrily in Knuckles. "Holy, you son-o'sin, you stealin' crowbait, that's Nellie's gold dust an' map yo're tottin' in yore jeans."

"I jus' borrowed enough for a couple of drinks," Holy asserted as a matter of fact. "I was dead set on turnin' it over to the gal, jus' as soon as I washed them desert lizzards outa my craw."

Mariposa's freckled faced sheriff swung to confront the old man. "Holy, I'm takin' that there map. I'm personally seein' that the proper papers is filed at the county seat."

A shrug shook Holy's bony shoulders, he scratched his head and tenderly pinched his favorite corn. "Knuckles," he sighed. "I aim you got me corralled. Danged if a man ain't kinda helpless sittin' in this here jail." Methodically, he pulled a yellow paper from his shirt, dug into levis and produced the bag of dust, and with a sense of resignation shoved them into the other's hands. "May the Lord grant I'm doin' the right thing."

It was a determined man who forked his buckskin at a breakneck pace towards the blue ridged mountains to the west. Carson, the county seat, was a good day's ride, and a sinister foreboding nursing in Knuckles' mind, drove him to jig his horse to the limit. Men had been murdered on the trail for far less than he carried at the moment. No sense of fear assailed him, only the fervent hope that lady luck was in his hand, for tonight he was riding for Nell Thompson—not himself.

"I reckon we ain't gonna have trouble," he murmured to himself, reaching affectionately to pat his tied-hard guns bobbing at his thighs. Then a curse slipped between clenched hard teeth, for the pearl-handled colt riding his right holster was gone! Had vanished as completely as if it had taken wings! Swearing softly, a frown of puzzlement stamped on his brow, Mariposa's sheriff switched his left 45 to the right.

Simultaneously, the spit of a carbine curdled the gathering shadows. With a sob, Knuckles buckskin heaved violently, sagged and pitched headlong with mushroom lead spilling blood from its neck. Stunned by the impact, Knuckles struggled weakly to his knees, fighting the sickening dizziness whirling the bushy mesquite before his eyes. Then the shadows spilled forth crashing bodies that descended with clubbing irons and flaying fists.

Super-human strength sprang suddenly alive in the sheriff's youthful body. Like a range-born stallion he threshed, flesh giving way before his driving fists. But the weight of numbers pulled him down, beat his face to a bloody pulp. Then the sheriff of Mariposa knew no more.

How long he was out cold, Knuckles Long never knew. A dull ache racked his lanky body as he opened his swollen eyes. He wasn't dead—the pain in his battered face and bruised body was too great for that. A yellow light flickered in his eyes; mesquite smoke wafted chokingly into his nostrils and the cough that followed tore lungs from his broken ribs.

Ace Wells' throated grunt rasped down from above. He forced open a blackened eye to the gunman's sneer twisted visage. Struggling to elbows, Knuckles' eyes were as steeled as his voice. "You ain't riskin' yore mangy hide, Ace," he rasped. "A two legged skunk most generally's got yaller stripes! I reckon with another try, I might be lickin' the lot, even with a

skunk like you thrown in!"

"Yuh're talkin' lively for a gent which is the same as dead." Ace's boot swung out and caught Knuckles full on the chin grounding him flat on his back again. Bitterly, he knew that Ace had played his hand—and won. The map and gold was gone. Like a fool he had blundered, risked and lost Nell Thompson's stake.

With a gloating laugh, Ace swung astride his barreled sorrel and jigged poundingly into the darkness. Knuckles knew only too well his mission. Ace was heading for the county seat to file Nell's claim in his own name. The truth drove burning rage into Knuckles veins. He cursed Ace Wells. He cursed himself.

WITH a swift glance, he took stock of the situation. Two swift strides would take him to a horse, but there would be five gunnies streaking lead at his first move. Gambling he made the kak, he'd be carrying lead, which would make the chances of overtaking Ace, mighty slim.

The crackling of the mesquite fire shattered his thoughts with a stunning suddenness. Noisily, he shoved his feet into the flame, clenched his teeth to fire searing through scarred boots burning with an acrid stench.

Knuckles' move brought results. With a violent oath one of Ace's hirelings dove for the scruff of his neck. Clenched fingers bit into Knuckles' flesh, then steeled fingers viced onto the gunman's feet, jerked and the man above crashed down with a sickening thud. A knuckled hand wedged out, caught the man's narrowed chin at the point. He rattled hollowly, slobbering teeth and blood.

The caress of iron cradled in his palm was as life to Knuckles Long. Purple lights were blinking against the night, powder spitting to the twang of lead, synonymous to his bucking gun.

With a bound, he gained the buckskin, vaulted saddle-wise with an impact which rasped a grunt from the startled animal's lungs. With grim satisfaction, there in that fleeting second, he saw two men were down. And with the parting shot, he sent the buckskin towards Carson town. That night beneath the stars, two men drove their mounts across the lowlands; one rode for the yellow glint of gold; the other—the woman he loved.

The hot flush of a mid-morning sun glared down on Carson town's ugly scatteration of c l a p b o a r d shacks as Knuckles Long spurred his buckskin down its dusty street. Ironically enough, he knew that again Ace Wells had won for the gunman's horse drooped before the court house steps. But Ace wasn't set to reap the benefits of his night's ride, if that power lay within Mariposa's sheriff's tied-hard gun.

There was a smug grin of satisfaction spread on Ace's ferrested visage; replaced the next moment by a deathly pall of what he saw in the man below blocked feet wide apart, as he shuffled onto the street. Ace's jaw gapped in astonished, curdled fear that protruded yellow rotted teeth between pale lips.

"I'm givin' yuh a chance to die like a man, Ace Wells," Knuckles rasped throatily, flaring shoulders hunched in a dangerous slant. "I'm gonna kill a yellow-livered b u z z a r d — a slant-eyed . . ."

The man above saw death staring him blandly in the face. Fear drove him stabbing to his holsters—fear which gave inhuman speed to his darting hands. Split seconds balanced with eternity between both men cradling death in their hearts.

Ace's gnarled hands burnished wood, clawed upwards with cold iron before Knuckles' arm seemed to move. No human eye could have followed the course

between gun and hand, streaking earthward then upward with the speed of light. Stunned surprise dominated Ace's twisted face as he caught the slug in the chest. A tremor coursed his giant frame. Twitching tendons fought vainly to target cold iron, spat coughingly to ricochet lead into the dirt at the swaying man's feet. Spasmodically clawing at his bloody shirt, lips gurgling, flecked with red, a hollow oath seeped from Ace Wells's dying lungs—then he was dead.

For moments Knuckles stared unseeingly into the yellow dust, then slowly he forked his flagged horse and cantered out of town. And deep down in his heart he knew that he couldn't tell Nell Thompson the truth about the mine her father had given his life to find.

HOLY SMOKE removed his inspection of his corns to squint at the dejected man drooping on the bunk.

"I failed yuh, Holy," the sheriff of Mariposa was going on. "Just a plumb crazy fool, that's what I am! Ace got them papers, an' beat me to the county seat. He's dead, I reckon, but that ain't bringin' back Nell's mine."

The other pinched his wrinkled face, arched a brow and scratched his bald fringe. "Son," he grunted apologetically with a tinge of embarrassment in his crackling tone, "I guess I sort a double-crossed you last night. I jus' sorta give you the wrong map. One I jus' sort a sketched in my spare time for gents which might be aimin' to jump a claim.

"After you'd done gone, I got to feelin' right bad for what I done. So I jus' had a feller which I know'd right well, ride herd to Carson an' file the right claim in Nell Thompson's name."

"You old crow-bait!" the Mariposa sheriff boomed, and in the ensuing moments there echoed strange whoops and yells from the adobe jail. For Knuckles Long was letting off a little exultant steam.

Knuckles Long found his lost pearl-handled .38 just outside Holy's cell. Punchers found Ace's gunnies—what was left of their shattered bodies—in groups of three and two. Mariposa's coroner dug nothing but .38 slugs out of three, and strangely enough the two others gave up .45's.

But Mariposa had always agreed that the sheriff was dynamite with that little pearl-handled .38.

Holy Smoke didn't stay in jail long. Knuckles saw to that. And anyway, Jeff Fellows was too humped up with gold fever to be riled about his stolen Silver City rig.

But most folks didn't know that old Holy Smoke could pick a right good lock or maybe a holster when he got the notion in his bald old head.

THE END

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# *Drop Your Guns—and Live Longer!*

**By RUSSELL A. BANKSON**

*Author of "Pilgrim from Purgatory," etc.*

*Those gunslicks had explosive tempers — so Ozias fed them dynamite!*

THE afternoon sun beat down upon Ozias Wilkins as he toiled up the mountain trail.

On his bent shoulder he carried a wooden box which was plainly marked on both ends, in bold letters: "CAUTION! DYNAMITE. HANDLE WITH CARE."

The last money Ozias and his wife, Mattie, possessed, had gone for the contents of that box, which he was packing up from the village of Silvertown, far down in the valley, to the prospect where they had toiled for twenty years.

The larder in the little log cabin, perched up there on the slope, beside the mine portal, was bare. That was why Ozias had trudged down into the valley that morning, to lay in provisions.

"Now you listen here, Ozias," Mattie had said to him. "We've put our last shot int' that mine. It ain't no good. If you come bringin' back another box o' powder, I'll—I'll up an' leave you. That's what I'll do!"

"But, Maw, it's in there," Ozias had weakly argued. "Why, just think, mebbe the next shot'll lay that vein wide open."

"Ozias! That's what you been sayin' fer twenty year, while we live on pork an' beans. The next shot! You bring back some grub, or I'm leavin'!"

"All right, Maw," Ozias had promised.

There was excitement in Silvertown when he got there. The day before there had been a big bank robbery up in the city. Two gangsters had killed a cashier and escaped with fifty thousand dollars. In their get-away, they had come up through the mountains, and on the grade above Silvertown, their car had been wrecked. The pair had taken to the hills on foot, carrying their loot.

State police were forming posses to surround them, and half of the population was joining in the manhunt, in the hopes of sharing the ten thousand dollar reward for the capture of the desperadoes. Ozias listened to the talk, and wished he were younger. Then he thought about the mine, and got into an argument with himself, over keeping his promise to Mattie.

"She'd be powerful mad," he temporized. "Only if'n I was t' make one more shot, an' there was the vain, all shinin' with silver, she'd git over it quick 'nough."

Later he said: "I got a notion t' see if'n she'd up an' leave. I bet she'd stay an' see what that last shot'ud bring."

He was still arguing like this when he went over to the general store and had a talk with Silas Potter, the storekeeper. When he left, to start back up the trail to the cabin, the heavy box rested squarely on his stooped shoulders.

"I bet she won't," he prophesied. But doubts were growing upon him, the nearer he came to the cabin. Mattie was a determined woman, sometimes.

On the bench below the cabin, he saw the marks of two men's shoes in the dust, and knew they weren't made by miners' boots. Quick alarm seized him. They were heading up the trail toward the cabin! And Mattie was there alone!

The last pitch he took on the run. He

came up over the hump, and there was the cabin, and over to the side was the mine portal. And best of all, there was Mattie, standing in the cabin door, like a Nemesis, waiting for him, her eyes fixed upon that box on his shoulder.

"Maw!" he gasped. "You all right?"

"An' why shouldn't I be?" Mattie flung back coldly, her eyes never leaving the box. "So you went an' done it, Paw! Well, that's the end. I told you it would be the last time!"

She tied her sunbonnet firmly over her greying hair, and picked up a satchel which she had already packed.

"I was expectin' what'ud happen," she said steadily. "I was all set t' leave." She stepped into the trail.

"Lissen, Maw!" Ozias pleaded. "They's a coupla murderers here-'bouts! I seen their footprints in the trail, down on the bench."

Mattie stopped short, staring.

"Look, Paw!" she said.

Ozias half turned. Two men were coming out of the mine portal. They carried black satchels in their left hands, and guns in their right hands.

"Don't move!" one of them rasped.

"Fix some food, old woman!" the smaller man ordered. "And you, Grandpa, drop that box and put your hands above your head!"

"Paw!" Mattie choked. "They'll kill you!"

Ozias said: "It don't make much difference, seein' you're gonna leave me an'—an' the mine, Maw."

Ozias straightened his shoulders and turned squarely around so he faced the two killers.

"Look at this box!" he said.

The desperadoes riveted their eyes upon it—and stopped.

"Dynamite! Handle with care!"

Ozias gave them a moment to let this sink in. He said: "A box o' powder this big'll kill every livin' thing fer three hundred yards."

"Set it down!" the bandit rasped.

"If'n you was t' shoot me, it'ud go off when I fell," Ozias said.

"SET IT DOWN!"

Ozias was stubborn. "Not less'n both o' you throw your guns away!"

"It will kill you, too," the gangster countered.

"Maw an' me ain't got much t' live fer," Ozias said. "Drop your guns!"

The two stared at the box.

"DYNAMITE! HANDLE WITH CARE!"

The smaller of the pair let his gun slip. Ozias raised the box threateningly, and the larger outlaw followed suit.

"Maw!" Ozias spoke without taking his eyes from the two killers. "Git that pulley rope in the shed."

Mattie set her satchel down and got the rope. "Now," Ozias went on, "you fellers stretch out on your stummicks. An' hurry. This box is danged heavy!"

They obeyed. Mattie bound their hands behind their backs, and their ankles together. Then Ozias set the box down on the stoop, and dragged the sullen pair into the tool shed, anchoring them securely to posts at opposite ends.

"Paw," Mattie said, coming toward him, her eyes shining, "I never woudda left. I was only a-scarin' you."

"Some o' the posse'll be along, lookin' fer them fellers," Ozias said. "Best stir up some grub, so's we can go with 'em, an' collect that reward. It'll be enough t' open the mine, Maw. Why, mebbe the next shot'll do it!"

"We ain't got no grub, Paw," Mattie said meekly.

Ozias picked up a hammer and bashed in the top of the box he had carried so carefully up the steep trail.

"Look out, Paw!" Mattie warned. "You're right careless."

"Shucks, Maw," Ozias chuckled. "Me an' Silas Potter packed the grub in this dynamite box, jest so's I could see if'n you meant what you said!"

# *Two Bulldoggers From Dodge*

## By BRAD BUCKNER

*Author of "Gun Prodigal's Return"*

*Grimly, they held to the trail sign of the escaped lion*

***A two-gun badman may be tough—but he's plain boothill bait against a locoed mountain maverick!***

YAVAPI YATES and Rusty Waller curbed their flagged broncs down before the plank-board fence and studied it curiously. It wasn't the fence that interested them. It was a bright colored poster portraying a pretty girl clad in acrobatic tights who swung from a trapeze suspended by her teeth. Beneath her, the artist had painted an assortment of jungle beasts. The words:

"SARGEANT'S BIG TOP CIRCUS"

ran in vivid letters across the bottom.

Yavapi screwed up his nose. He hooked a crooked forefinger over his snag teeth, testing them incredulously.

"It ain't possible," he said flatly. "A woman holdin' herself up in the air by nothin' but her teeth."

Rusty spit in disgust. "Yo're always jumpin' at conclusions, Yavapi," he snorted. "I seen a hombre do the same in Dodge City once. Ain't seen a circus since."—He sighed, scraping a knuckle across his stubble beard.—"Times is changin'. Women, now-a-days is doin' things jus' as good as men.

There was nothing that Yavapi and Rusty would rather do than argue. For twenty years they had been disagreeing. It was Rusty's prophecy that if Yavapi lay down and died, and he, Rusty, came along and said: "Yavapi yo're dead"; the corpse would jump up and yell: "You're a liar, un I kin prove it."

Such was the situation now, and they

reveled in it. For moments hot words passed between them. It would have continued longer, but the blare of a brass band drowned out their haranguing.

Both men squinted up Bowie town's main street. Between the drab clapboard buildings on either side came the forerunner of the parade. The off-tune screech of the band was too much for the buckskins hitched before the Buzz-Saw Saloon. They careened against the hitch-rack while their frantic owners worked furiously to herd them to the back of the saloon.

Rusty's mount stiffened beneath his bowed legs, reared and the oldster pulled him down hard. Yavapi's bronc jumped a couple of lengths and settled down trembling, ears flattened back.

Neither man spoke. In unison they neck-reined behind the fence, tethered their nervous animals to a post and hit for the street like a couple of kids.

Bowie town was out to a man. The two oldsters mixed quickly with the inhabitants, necks craned as the spectacle rumbled by before their wizened eyes in an array of color, clowns, beasts, pretty girls and slick-faced men, that would go down in the history of Bowie, and be the topic of conversation for years to come.

When the last wagon had passed, the two fell in behind with the rest of the hilarious townspeople. At the end of the street where the clapboard shacks gave way to the open Texas grass-lands beyond, the column swung to the right. A quarter of a mile further, sweat-beaded hands were pulling the great tent into shape up the main pole.

A midday sun found the two men still hanging around the tent. When the dinner gong clanged, they discovered a sudden empty feeling inside—a disconcerting fact since they didn't have a double-eagle between them.

"I could eat uh elephant," Yavapi muttered, "if I had uh little salt tuh go along."

Rusty nodded in agreement. Pleasant odors were wafting from the cook tent. The two shuffled in that direction, and peered in. Heads poked hungrily through the opening they were unaware of a tall, regal man standing at their backs. Yavapi's eyes settled on a pie within reach. He eased out a hand, was about to scoop it up when a well-placed boot caught him midcenter from the rear.

With a grunt, Yavapi sprawled on his pug nose. When he flopped off his face, spitting dust, he was palming a gun, but the offender already had them covered. And from the looks of Jeff Sargeant, he knew how to use the six-gun palming his hand.

Yavapi gritted a curse. Rusty's booming guffaws tempered his pride as much as the indignity of the kick. "Shut yore yappin'," he demanded, and sidled a frown on the gent with the gun. "An' who be you?"

"Most folks just call me Jeff," the other volunteered, "but Sargeant is the last part, if you're interested. I own this here circus lock, stock an' barrel, an' I don't like gents swipin' victuals without workin' for 'em."

YAVAPI crawled slowly to his feet. Rusty straightened up, gasping for breath. "We're willin' tuh work," he said. "Reckon yuh could use a couple a right good hands?"

Jeff Sargeant scanned the two oldsters puzzedly. There was a homely easy-going cast about the lanky, raw boned puncher, Rusty, and his short, barrel-chested pardner, Yavapi. "You gents don't look like no hands for circus work," he said at last, "but on the other hand I'm willin' to give it a try. If you want grub an' lodgin' in uh empty wagon along with fifty a month a man, I'm game."

Yavapi got over his anger fast. Fifty a month and beans! It was a gift from heaven to the two men who hadn't worked for two months since they got fired off the Double O. They would have still been working if Rusty hadn't caught Luke Fallows, their boss, cheating in a poker game. There was a mere two bucks in the pot that night, but it was the principle of the thing. Rusty had called Luke Fallows' play with smoking guns, backed by his pardner, Yavapi. When the smoke cleared, they collected the pot while their erstwhile boss groaned with a slug in his shoulder. They hadn't waited to be fired—they quit.

Now they were working again for Jeff Sargeant. Rusty grinned happily. "We're your men," he said. "Lead us tuh the grub."

Jeff Sargeant holstered his gun. He swung away with the two at his heels.

"What's our work?" Yavapi ventured curiously for want of something to say.

The tall man thought a moment. "Tendin' the lions."

"Lions!" Yavapi and Rusty gulped in unison, pulling up short. A silent glance passed between them. Yavapi shrugged: "If I wasn't so hungry . . ."

Rusty Waller licked his lips. "Yeah." He fell in behind again. "Guess we'd better eat 'fore we get et," he said philosophically. "No sense cheatin' the lions."

And frowning hopelessly, Yavapi shuffled after his pardner, grimly shaking his wizened head.

Jeff Sargeant furnished good food for his help. The two oldsters made up for the lean days back when they had existed on a few scraps of jerked beef and tepid water. Stomachs filled they would have been at peace with the world, if it hadn't been for the thought of their job to come.

The strawboss, a bald-headed, scar-faced individual, led them into the big tent and down the line of caged beasts. Instinctively, Rusty's bronze hands slipped thighward to tied-hard guns.

The caged managerie gave the trio a hearty welcome. It was like a cat fight, only stepped up about a thousand times.

"What's eatin' 'em?" Yavapi inquired nervously.

"They're hungry."

Yavapi shivered, measuring Rusty's skinny frame and his rather chunky own. Next, he weighed the strength of the iron-barred cages. They didn't look too strong for him.

The bald-headed man brought them up short before one of the cages. The lion behind the bars scanned the three sleepily, and dozed off again. "That's Oscar," the strawboss advised casually. "Start on 'im 'cause he's so old he couldn't do mor'n gum yuh. He ain't got no teeth."

Rusty sighed: "I'm close enough. Now what'll we do?"

"Clean his cage. First yuh slip that there small gate on the far end. That'll lead tuh a smaller cage. When yuh git him inside the small one, yuh shut the gate an' clean the big un. Nothin' tuh it."

Silently, the two watched their adviser leave. Again the two looked at each other. "An' tuh think," Rusty muttered, "we got in tuh this all, 'cause yuh claimed no woman could hang by her teeth."

Yavapi set his lips hard against his yellow teeth. He edged closer to the cage and peered in at the lion. Unconcerned the beast slept on, unaware of the consternation he was causing between the two rannies.

"Simple," Yavapi shrugged. "Rusty yo're losin' yore nerve."

The oldster's gaunt frame snapped rigid to the taunt. He shuffled casually

to the wagon and pulled up the gate. Oscar lifted an ear to the waddie's antics but didn't move.

After a few minutes, it became plain that the lion wasn't to be herded into the cage easily. Rusty banged the butt of his six-gun across the bars to no avail. Next they tried urging and failed again.

"An' I reckoned steers was the most ornery brutes on four legs," Yavapi spit disgustedly. "The varmit is goin' in that there iron corral, if I have tuh go in an' carry 'im!"

"I kin see yuh gittin' in there with a lion," Rusty taunted, still burned from his pardner's sarcasm of a few moments before.

"By gawd I'll show yuh!" Yavapi jumped on the wagon hub and shot the lock. Slowly he edged open the gate, sorry now that he had let Rusty get him in such a tight. The lion looked twice as big without bars between.

THE beast didn't seem to mind his presence. Encouraged, he slid inside, propped on bowed legs, chest thrown out, smirking at his wide-eyed pardner. "Nothin' tuh it," he boasted.

No doubt the lion wouldn't have belied Yavapi's words under ordinary circumstances. However, something unusual occurred in the person of gun-fire thundering suddenly from the far end of the tent.

Startled, Yavapi swung around. Simultaneously, the lion went berzerk. The bulbous body of the oldster blocked the gate, but his bowed legs provided a human arch and the animal dove straight for the hole.

Yavapi let out a blood-curdling yell as Oscar's shaggy mane tunneled his levis. He was still yelling when he came out of the cage forked on the lion's back, threshing like a windmill in a tornado.

No bronc buster ever came off a steer quicker than Yavapi left his mount. The lion shook dog-like, cast a furtive glance at the oldster and hit for parts unknown.

Oaths were rattling Yavapi's teeth as he bounded to his feet. Stunned, Rusty watched his pardner dash off in Oscar's wake, and then followed swiftly himself.

The beast was taking hunks of Texas prairie in bounds as Yavapi broke into open air. A thin-faced hombre was in the motion of swinging astride his buckskin. A bound carried the blocky oldster to the horse; another cleared flank and he shoved its startled rider unceremoniously groundward.

Yavapi bellied steel, leeching leather, hanging low across the withers. The lion took two strides to the horse's one. Intent with his mission, he was unaware of the bedlam springing into a roar at his back. If he had cast a brief glance back flank, he would have seen Rusty Waller giggling hard in his wake.

The chase eased down to a steady grind. Presently, it was a matter of tracking which slowed his pace and permitted Rusty to catch up.

"Yuh loco-headed lizzard," the tall man yelled disgustedly. "Now we'll git fired sure as hell!"

Yavapi didn't answer. Grimly, he held to the trail-sign of the escaped lion. A half hour led them down to the bosque of a muddy, brush hemmed stream. There the trail blotted out completely.

Discouraged, the two pulled up to think. Another argument ensued. They were still arguing when the crack of snapping brush brought them up short.

"He's hidin' in that there clump a bush," Rusty said softly, angling a crooked finger towards a scatteration of blueberry and sapling cotton wood.

"Yeah."

"Now, lion tamer, what're we gonna do next?"

Yavapi scratched his chin vigorously. "The gent said he ain't got no teeth."

"Uh-huh," Rusty grated, "but I ain't takin' his word. If yuh believe 'im maybe yuh got guts enough to go in there an' rope 'im like a steer?"

The suggestion broke a gleam to Yavapi's faded eyes. He uncoiled the rope looped across the horn, eased down, and approached the clump cautiously. Grim, expecting momentarily to hear most anything, Rusty slid off his kak and followed.

He had gone no more than two strides when the ruckus began. A roar split the silence and riding it came Yavapi's booming yell. Bedlam seemed to break from the roots of hell centered in the swaying clump. Then from it all tumbled Yavapi's paunchy form, bowed legs fogging under full speed. A stride behind, came the lion.

Tears were streaming down the blocky man's face. He was yelling, mouth agap. The lion also was acting strangely. No more had he hit the clearing than he went into a series of ground loops, pawing at the air.

It was an amazing sight, and Rusty absorbed it wide-eyed. Then out of the brush strolled the cause—a polecat. An obnoxious odor stabbed the oldster's nostrils. "By gawd," he gasped, "the two done run agin uh skunk."

Meanwhile Yavapi made his bronc. He hit saddle with a bound, but the presence of the lion along with the fat man's ill-smelling frame was too much for the horse. The animal heaved in fright and went into a sunfish. When he came down, Yavapi wasn't asaddle. Saddle screwed under its belly, the bronc broke away from the oldster's ground-crashing hulk.

Slowly, Yavapi sat up, still clinging to the saddle bags that had come away from the kak. He was a pathetic looking figure, squatted in a lump.

Rusty rubbed his nose, siddled up within ten feet of his pardner and stopped. He arched a wizened eye, sorrowfully wagging his head. "Yavapi," he said, "you un trouble is one an' the same."

His pardner was too disgruntled to argue. He had forgotten the lion. The polecat's havoc would have made him forget anything.

THE thunder of shod hoofs beat down. Rusty swung to the sound, noting the group of horsemen fogging toward them fast. At the head of the group he made out Jeff Sargeant's regal form.

They curbed down, fanned about the two men. Yavapi didn't appear interested. If he had, he would have noticed twenty odd guns covered him and his pardner.

"Hangin' is quick medicine fer highwaymen," a member of the crew stormed angrily. "Let's string 'em up."

Even Yavapi started to that. Bleary-eyed he stared at Rusty, then to the others. "We never tried tuh steal the lion," he muttered. "I wouldn't take 'im as a gift."

Jaws set, stony eyed, Jeff Sargeant weathered the polecat's stench and took the saddle bags from Yavapi's arms. He cast a swift glance into the contents of the pouches. "Reckon it's all here," Jeff sounded relieved. He frowned at

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the two and went on. "Maybe you'd like to explain about this stolen cash."

It was Rusty who vouched for the two. Yavapi was too sick to talk. Never had Rusty told a truer yarn that sounded more like a lie as he went along. "I swear we was chasin' the lion," he ended up flatly. "Yuh can believe or no." He cut off short. Then a sudden inspirational light stamped his visage. "Yuh think Yavapi un me would uh stopped tuh play with a lion if we was after money? No sir!"

It was a winning point. Rusty saw that some of the stern-faced group believed him half-heartedly.

"Maybe the hombres is tellin' the truth," a puncher cut in. "Reckon they wouldn't uh unseated the gent which robbed Jeff's till, leavin' him tuh git caught, if they was in on the deal."

Jeff Sargeant nodded in agreement. "We got these gents all wrong," he said apologetically.

Rusty heaved a sigh of relief. The lion meanwhile had ceased its growling, and was being led off dejectedly by its trainer. Both events eased Rusty's peace of mind. The less he saw of lions from now on the better!

The circus ramrod gripped the oldster's hand. "Reckon we judged you two wrong," he said gratefully. "You damn near lost me a lion, but all the same you two gents saved near two thousand in cash. I'm thankin' you both." He swung on Yavapi and studied him soberly. "It's again my wishin' but I'm gonna have to fire you both. Your pard here ain't gonna be fit company for nigh on a week, an' I can't afford to be losin' customers from a gent which smells o' skunk. The lion's gonna be bad enough."

"I kin see your point," Rusty grunted. "Even me is gonna have a hard time associatin' with 'im fer some time tuh come."

Jeff Sargeant shoved a wad of bills in the oldster's palm. When the group swung back to Bowie town, the two rannies followed, with Yavapi twenty yards to the flank. If the riders up ahead had listened carefully, they would have heard Yavapi cursing softly beneath his breath.

Two dejected rannies gigged slowly from Bowie town. They did not ride together. Rusty held the lead, taciturn and resigned. He slanted a frown towards his pardner. "Yavapi," he threatened, "if yuh come within yards uh me inside a week, I'll sling a gun on yuh sure as hell!"

Deep gloom etched Yavapi's bronze, resigned map. He shrugged: "There ain't no justice."

Rusty Waller wagged his grayed shock sorrowfully. "An' we never even got uh chance tuh see the circus. I'd a proved tuh yuh a woman kin hang by her teeth."

Yavapi Yates wedged his jaw stubbornly. "It can't be done," he blurted.

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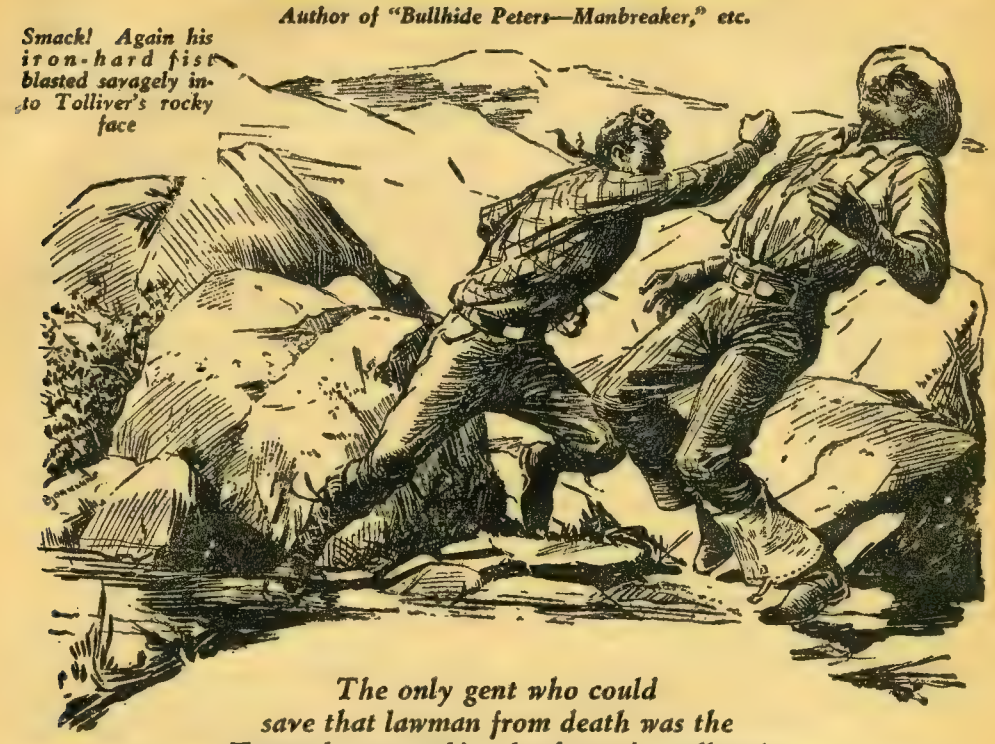
# A Hang-Noose Won't Hold a Texan

## By GUNNISON STEELE

*Author of "Bullhide Peters—Manbreaker," etc.*



*Smack! Again his iron-hard fist blasted savagely into Tolliver's rocky face*

***The only gent who could save that lawman from death was the Texan he was taking back to the gallows!***

AFTER a fierce struggle with the raging, ice-clogged stream, young Smoky Rivers finally pulled himself onto the frozen bank and turned to stare back at the man in the seething water.

The man in the water was Duke Tolliver, a crooked deputy sheriff back in the crooked cowtown of Tenspot. Tolliver was a big, cruel-eyed gent with flat, dark, arrogant features. But Tolliver wasn't a good swimmer, and that was liable to prove the difference between life and death.

The lanky, red-haired Texas waddy watched the deputy as he fought the yellow, churning torrent. Tolliver was no more than twenty feet from the bank, but Smoky Rivers knew that, unaided, he'd never make it out. Tolliver knew it too, but he never stopped fighting. He was like a bull-dog, hard, merciless. He boasted that he always got what he went after, one way or another. Now, even as death reached icy hands for him, he didn't ask for help.

Jumbled thoughts whirled in Smoky's brain as he watched Tolliver's fight for life. On the ground nearby was a cotton wood branch, twenty feet long. Instinctive decency screamed for him to grab the branch and thrust it out to where Tolliver could grasp it. But Smoky fought himself stubbornly to keep from doing it.

For if he pulled Duke Tolliver from the stream, it meant a hang-noose. If he let him drown, it meant freedom. . . .

Two days ago, back in Tenspot, Smoky Rivers had killed a man. Playing stud poker in a strange town, he'd caught one of the card-slicks cheating. There was a gun-ruckus, and when the powdersmoke cleared away the tinhorn lay dead on the floor.

It had been a clear case of self-defense. But the gun-swift Texas ranny had quickly discovered that he didn't have a chance for a fair trial in Tenspot. For the card-slick he'd killed was Jack Dorn, son of old Hawk Dorn, gun-boss of Tenspot. So Smoky Rivers had been thrown behind bars.

That same night, a while before dawn, he'd ripped a rotten bar from his cell window, topped his own roan bronc and slipped out of town. But almost instantly Duke Tolliver had bayed like a hound dog on his trail, bent on collecting the thousand dollar bounty that Hawk Dorn had placed on his head. Relentlessly as a hungry wolf, he'd trailed Smoky. And captured him, for Smoky Rivers had been without a gun.

They'd started down out of the hills in the teeth of a raging blizzard. The blizzard had hit full force a while before they reached the swollen, boiling stream. They'd left their broncs on the far side, knowing that to get wet meant almost certain death, and started across in a leaky boat that was cached there.

A sudden impulse, born of desperation, had caused Smoky Rivers to tip the boat, capsizing the rickety craft and dumping them both into the treacherous current. . . .

Now Smoky knew it was the crooked deputy's life against his own. If he let Tolliver drown, that would end things; he could go back to Texas and forget about that fake murder charge.

But, all at once, Smoky Rivers knew he couldn't let even a wolf die like that. Telling himself he was a fool for doing it, he seized the cottonwood branch, flung one end of it out toward Duke Tolliver. Tolliver grabbed frantically at the limb, but there was no gratitude in his frozen eyes.

The deputy's legs were so numb and stiff with cold that he staggered as he pulled himself onto the bank beside Smoky Rivers. The redheaded ranny stared in amazement at the thing in Duke Tolliver's hand. Even in his fight for life in the raging water, Tolliver hadn't turned loose of the long-barreled .45 he'd been holding on Smoky when the boat capsized!

Now he jabbed the gun at Smoky, a vicious sneer curling his thin lips.

"You thought, after yuh saved my life, I'd be tender hearted and let yuh go free, didn't you?" he asked.

Quick anger lashed at Smoky Rivers. "No, I didn't think that," he grunted contemptuously. "I pulled yuh out, just like I'd pull out a dog, or a coyote. Anyway, what difference does it make. Hadn't yuh just as soon drown as freeze to death?"

TOLLIVER shook his shaggy head jerkily. He looked down at his clothes, already freezing on his body, then about at the bleak, empty country. A blue-black twilight had settled. The bitterly cold wind was howling with renewed fury down from the hills, bringing a drift of sleety snow.

Duke Tolliver knew that, without a fire and shelter, they'd freeze to death within an hour. A queer, trapped look came into his yellowish eyes.

"I ain't gonna freeze," he said fiercely. "I ain't never been licked, and I don't aim to let a blizzard do it. I aim to take yuh back to Tenspot, and collect that thousand dollar bounty!"

Tolliver felt with stiff fingers in first one pocket, then another. That panicky look deepened in his predatory eyes.

"Yuh got a match?" he asked harshly.

Smoky nodded, felt in his pocket and produced a tiny silver match box and opened it.

"Just one," he said slowly.

Greedily Tolliver snatched the match box. Inside the box was a single match. Carefully Duke Tolliver tested it.

"Dry!" he gloated. "We'll make a fire and dry out these duds. Then we'll hit for Tenspot!"

"Just one little match, Tolliver," the Texas redhead spoke grimly. "All that's between us and freezin' to death. What if that match don't burn?"

"It's gotta burn! I'm lucky, too lucky for that match to go out. If it does—if we don't get a fire. . . ."

"We'll die!" Smoky drawled, and grinned thinly. "It wouldn't be pleasant to die like that, to freeze up like a cake of ice, would it? I heard you was tough, Tolliver; they told me back in Tenspot that yuh broke gents in two with yore hands. Not gettin' scared, are yuh?"

"Who said I was gettin' scared?" the bounty-hunter ripped out. He stared quickly about, shoved his gun at Smoky Rivers. "Git over there to them cliffs. We got tuh have a wind-break."

Smoky Rivers saw sudden, ruthless death staring at him from Duke Tolliver's blazing eyes. He turned, stumbled toward a nest of cliffs that cradled a bend in the stream a hundred yards away. Already his body felt numb, dead. Slivers of ice chipped from his frozen clothing as he walked.

They found a little hollow between two walls, which served as a wind-break. Bits of dead grass and brush littered the ground. Even with the inadequate wind-break, Smoky knew that without a fire they'd freeze to death within a short while.

Duke Tolliver's movements were jerky, as he started gathering bits of twigs and grass. He kept looking upward, as if trying to locate the restless, moaning sound in the sky. Finally, when he'd raked together a pile of kindling, he knelt and took the match from the box.

Smoky watched narrowly. Maybe that match meant less to him than it did to Duke Tolliver. If he went back to Tenspot, he'd maybe hang, and for nothing worse than killing a tinhorn card-slick who had needed killing. With life in the pot, a gent could afford to gamble. . . .

"The last match, Tolliver," he heard himself saying. "Yo're hard—hard enough to hang an innocent man, just to collect a thousand dollar bounty. But are yuh hard enough to keep from freezin'?"

"Stop talkin' about freezin', blast yuh!" Tolliver said savagely. "Here—git down and help keep the wind from blowin' this match out!"

Smoky dropped to his knees beside the deputy. There was a strained tense look on Tolliver's thin face, and his breath hissed harshly between clenched teeth. Carefully shielding the match in the palm of his hand, Tolliver scratched it across a rock. As the match flared up jerkily, he applied it quickly to the pile of kindling.

The pale flame licked at a twig, spread to another.

Smoky Rivers reared suddenly to his feet. His muscular shoulder caught Tolliver under the chin, knocked him sprawling.

At the same instant a howling gust of wind swooped into the little hollow. A tiny spiral of gray smoke curled upward from the pile of kindling as the flame licked out!

WITH a savage oath, Duke Tolliver lunged to his feet. Stark panic flared momentarily in his cruel eyes as he stared at the pile of twigs. Then he whirled on Smoky Rivers.

"You brainless idiot!" he croaked harshly. "Why'd yuh do that? Yuh've the same as murdered us both!"

Smoky Rivers faced the big man-breaker, his smoke-wreathed eyes bleak as the blizzard winds that screamed about them.

"Mebby I have," he said, through

teeth that were clenched to keep them from chattering with cold. "Yo're a yella skunk, Tolliver. Yuh don't deserve to live. As for me, if I go back to Tenspot with you, I'll be gallows bait. This way, I'll at least have the satisfaction of seein' you die with me. Die slowly, like a bucket of water freezin'!"

"I ain't gonna die!" Duke Tolliver gibbered. "Didn't I say I ain't never been licked?"

"Yo're gonna be licked now," the Texas redhead rapped. "I aim to lick you, beat yuh to a pulp, just to show yuh before you die that you ain't so tough and hard. And when I'm through, the blizzard will finish yuh up. Git set, you bounty-huntin' four-flusher—heah I come!"

He started toward Tolliver. But Tolliver backed away, the gun out-thrust in his hand.

"Stay back," he yelled hoarsely.

Cursing wildly, Tolliver jerked at the trigger. But nothing happened.

"The trigger on that gun's frozen," Smoky said. "Just a cake of ice, like you'll be in a little while. Hear that wind, Tolliver? That's the blizzard gods laughin'."

Smoky Rivers leaped s u d d e n l y, ducked to escape the gun that Tolliver flung savagely at him. His fist arced, smashed with terrific force into the deputy's snarling features. Tolliver reeled backward, blood spurting from his lips. Then he braced himself, fell into a half-crouch. Eyes murderous, he shuffled like an enraged grizzly toward Smoky.

Smoky stoood motionless, watching the big man's advance, a cold grin curling his lips. Tolliver's smashed lips were working. Whimpering noises came from his thick throat.

Then, like a huge cat, he leaped. Smoky Rivers didn't dodge or retreat.

Smack! A g a i n his iron-hard fist blasted savagely into Tolliver's rocky face. But Tolliver caught his arm, jerked him in close, flung his arms about his lighter antagonist's body. Pain lanced through Smoky's body as those massive arms c l a m p e d down. He rammed his knee upward into Tolliver's stomach, and they went down.

Locked in each other's arms, they rolled over and over, mauling, clawing, gouging, fighting with the savagery of hungry wolves. Then, suddenly, they were on their feet again, driving with jarring blows to each other's faces.

Slowly, Duke Tolliver gave ground. He was more powerful than Smoky Rivers. But the spirit had gone out of him. Smoky knew suddenly that the bullying deputy was afraid, a coward. Desperately, he kept after Tolliver.

And Duke Tolliver kept backing away. His eyes flicked wildly about for some means of escape. But Smoky followed him relentlessly, his hard fists chopping and smashing at Tolliver's battered features. Not until Duke Tolliver had wilted completely, and lay on the frozen ground, did he stop.

After a moment, Tolliver got slowly to his feet. Clashing emotions were stamped on his face as he stared bewilderedly about. Rage. Puzzlement. Then stark, naked fear.

"Licked!" he whispered hoarsely. "Gawd—I kin already feel the ice in my blood. . . ."

Duke Tolliver turned suddenly, like

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a man gone blind, and started reeling away from the cliffs. But he'd gone no more than ten steps when Smoky Rivers' voice lashed out at him above the screaming wind.

"Wait!" Smoky called. "Tolliver, you cowardly rat, come back heah!"

BUT Duke Tolliver didn't stop, nor look back. He heard the pound of the fighting redhead's boots behind him, and memory of those battering, slashing fists made him reel faster in a wild effort to escape. But Smoky's arms went suddenly about him, dragged him to a standstill. Tolliver struggled, cursing and whimpering as Smoky dragged him back into the hollow.

"Yuh can stop whinin', Tolliver," the redhead said contemptuously. "Yuh ain't gonna die. Look at the fire—it's burnin'!"

The big bounty hunter stared amazedly at the pile of kindling on the ground. He saw a wisp of gray smoke curl upward. Then a yellow tongue of flame licked hungrily at the twigs. Warmth, like a belated benediction, touched their faces.

The fire was burning—would continue to burn!

Duke Tolliver huddled over the fire, letting the heat penetrate his clothing. And slowly a cunning light seeped into his yellowish eyes. A hint of his former domineering cruelty came to his battered face. His gaze moved furtively about the hollow, searching the ground.

"No use, Tolliver," Smoky told him softly. "I've got the gun now, and the fire's thawed it out. I'm boss, now!"

"That gun won't keep you from hangin'," Tolliver sneered. "You may kill me, but that murder charge'll still be against you back in Tenspot. Yuh cain't get away from that."

"I don't aim tuh try to get away," Smoky said. "No jury on earth, outside of Tenspot, would convict me of murder. I didn't break jail because I was guilty. I meant to go over to Buckhorn and surrender to Sheriff Tom Stark, where I could get a fair trial. That's where I was headed when yuh caught me. That's where I'm goin' now, soon as this blizzard lets up, and yo're goin' with me—hawg-tied! After that, yuh'll be laughed out of office. Yuh won't ever spend any more blood-bounty money, Tolliver!"

Duke Tolliver hunched lower over the fire, to hide the bitter defeat in his eyes. The howl of the wind as it swept down from the hills sounded like a requiem, cruel and mocking.

But for Smoky Rivers, the red-haired Texas buckaroo, it carried a note of hope and promise for the future. . . .

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Western Short Stories, Published Bi-Monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1938

State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Abraham Goodman, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Western Short Stories and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, N. Y.; Editor, Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, N. Y.; Business Manager, Abraham Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.)

Manvis Publications, Inc., R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, N. Y.; Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, N. Y.; Jean Davis Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is ..... (This information is required from daily publications only.)

ABRAHAM GOODMAN,
Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 23rd day of September, 1938.

[SEAL] MAURICE COYNE.

(My commission expires March 30, 1940.)

New York Co. Clerk No. 562.

# *Range Where Men*

**GREAT DRAMATIC COW-COUNTRY YARN OF AN INDOMITABLE YOUNG DEPUTY'S LONE-HAND GUN-WAR!**

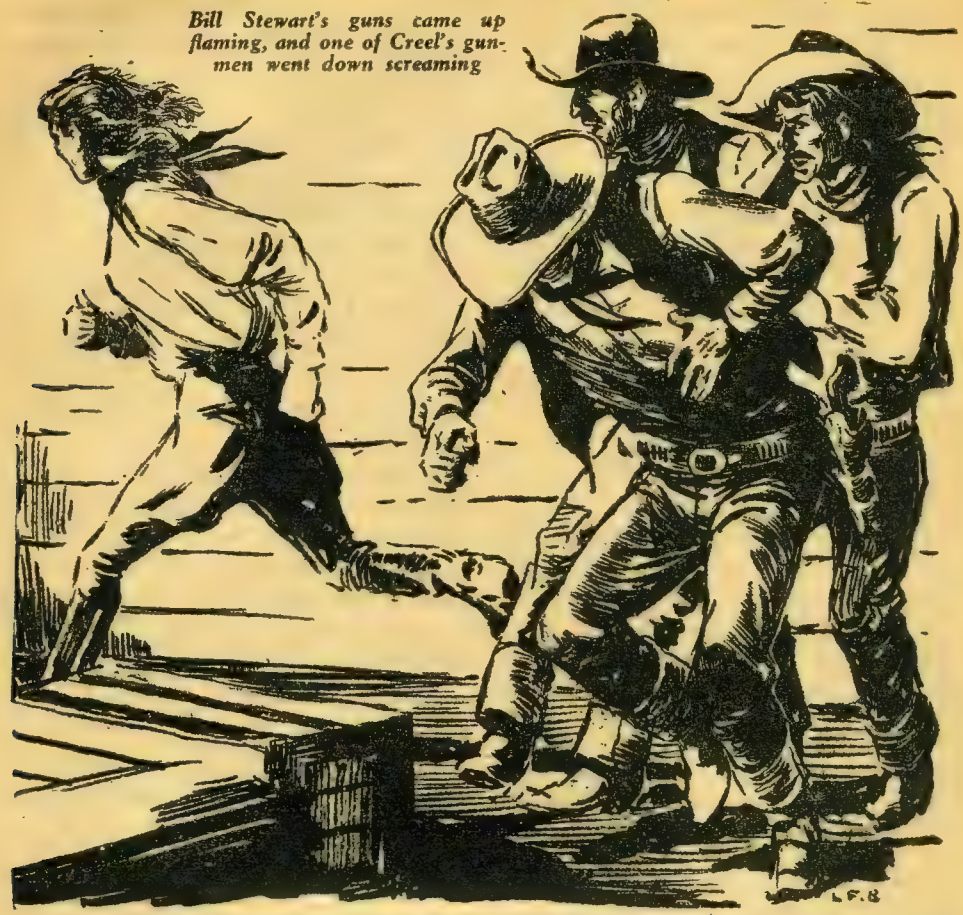
THE trail to Belmont lay along the river, where willows dragged their fronds in the shallows near the bank. Sheriff Bill Stewart rode with slate-gray eyes alert, while the breeze picked at his sombrero brim, and the red dust of the road whipped up into clouds under the cantering hoofs of his mount. It didn't look like a country of violence, but the sheriff knew different—knew only too well.

A mile or two down the road, three riders were coming toward him from the direction of town. They were too far away as yet to identify, but if they should be any of Matt Creel's men—Stewart's right hand slipped back to adjust the Colt in its holster on his hip. He knew well enough how matters stood between him and Creel, the gun-boss of the Belmont range. Their feud had begun two months ago, when he cracked open Creel's gun-tight town and brought out Tom Rankin for stage robbery and murder. He had bluffed it through and got his man out with a whole skin; but it was only on the way back to the county seat that he noticed the piece of paper tied to one of his saddle straps, with a few words scrawled on it.

# *Died Twice*

**By D. B. NEWTON**

*Author of "Brand of the Hunted," etc.*



*Bill Stewart's guns came up flaming, and one of Creel's gunmen went down screaming*

***Sheriff Bill Stewart knew well enough how matters stood between himself and Matt Creel, gun-boss of all Belmont range. He knew that this time when he tried to bring Creel's back-shooting secundo to justice, every citizen of that lead-tight town would be waiting for him—with a hangnoose in one hand, and a six-gun in the other!***

**"Sheriff or no sheriff; in this town your life ain't worth a lead nickle. Take a hint, and—don't come back!"**

That was all. But without a signature, even, Stewart knew from whom that warning had come. Tom Rankin was Matt Creel's right hand man, and valuable. And when someone, a couple of days ago, blew out the side of the jail with dynamite and set him free, the sheriff had known as surely as if he had been told who had ordered the delivery, and where he would find Tom Rankin if he had the nerve to go there and look for him.

And this was his answer to Matt Creel's challenge: riding again to Belmont, single-handed, in an attempt to repeat what he had done before, and take Rankin a second time. But this time, he knew, every gun in Creel's town would be waiting for him.

That explained the hardness of his eye, and the bunching of the muscles along his jaw, as he rode to meet those three horsemen upon the Belmont trail.

For the nearer they approached, the stronger grew a feeling that one of them —the man on the roan, in the center— was Matt Creel himself. He couldn't say exactly what told him that, except that there were few men on that range as big as Creel, and this man filled the saddle in a way that was something to see. His companions looked very small beside him. And then, as the afternoon sun found a glint of silver on the black, flat-topped sombrero the rider wore, Stewart was sure. Matt Creel always wore a hat like that, with metal studs worked into the band.

The other two, then, would be a couple of his gunmen. "Red" Foster, perhaps. Maybe even Tom Rankin. . . . But before he could determine that, the three riders suddenly vanished from the trail, and Stewart realized that they must have turned aside into the trees that fringed the stream.

He rode on until he reached the place where the trio had disappeared into the willows. There was an old wooden bridge spanning the stream. On an impulse, Stewart turned his horse across it. If Rankin should happen to be with Creel, there ahead of him, there might be a chance of having a showdown and cleaning the job up at once, and out here away from the town and Creel's mob of gunmen.

The wide-spaced, splintered planks of the bridge rumbled under steel hoofs as he jogged across it; then he had pushed through the shielding brush and willows that lined the other bank and saw, a half a mile away across the rolling plain, the headquarters of a tiny ranch.

It was a nice layout for a one-man spread, and could be built into something better. The river would give adequate water for the stock, and someone had dug an irrigation ditch for an acre or two of plowed field around the house. The buildings were on a rise of ground, that the rain might drain off the yard, and there was a windmill to pump water up to the higher level. The blades spun idly in the breeze.

THERE were trees around the house, too; they completed the friendly, home-like atmosphere of the place.

Creel and his men were sitting in their saddles before the door, apparently talking to some one on the porch, as Stewart rode up. They didn't notice the sheriff at first, until he was almost in their midst, and he had an opportunity to size the thing up.

Tom Rankin was not there. One of the men had removed his hat and Bill, seeing the mop of rusty hair thus uncovered, immediately recognized one of Creel's top men, Red Foster. There was, of course, no mistaking Creel himself. The third man, Bill had never seen before, but he had the look of one of the Belmont gunmen.

Then Stewart caught a glimpse of the person who stood within the shadow of the porch, facing the trio, and his jaw almost dropped open at what he saw.

It was a girl, standing there at the head of the steps. The dress she wore— Bill Stewart didn't know much about women's clothes, but he could see that it was made out of some soft-looking material, without sleeves, and with flounces or ruffles or something around the hem of the skirt and at the shoulders—almost matched the bright yellow of her hair. He couldn't see her face very well, but she looked small and extremely feminine there at the top of the steps, facing the three horsemen in the yard; feminine, that is, except for one thing—the big Winchester that she held in her arms, its muzzle pointed at the chest of Matt Creel. The rifle was much too big for her, but on the other hand she looked as though she knew how to use it.

Stewart saw all this as he walked his

pony into the yard, and before anybody seemed to notice him. But then the girl had looked up and was staring at him, while Creel and his two men whirled to face him.

"Howdy, people," said the sheriff, quietly.

Matt Creel's face was a picture as he stared at Bill, amazement vying with hatred in the expressions that flashed across his dark, coarse features. There was nothing pretty about the boss of Belmont. His hair, turned prematurely gray, made his face seem only that much the darker, while his thick black eyebrows and trimmed mustache further accentuated the contract. From flat-topped hat with the silver studs around the band, to his low-heeled, low-topped shoes, he was dressed completely in black.

Stewart glanced quickly at Red Foster, whose wide eyes were staring at him from under his mop of rusty hair. The sheriff noticed that Foster had taken off his hat with his gun hand, which would make it difficult for him to get his gun out in a hurry. The other man was sitting motionless, with both hands on the pommel of his saddle. It didn't look like immediate gunplay.

Matt Creel was the first to speak.

"Stewart, eh?" he grunted.

Bill nodded. "Ain't surprised to see me, are you, Creel? I thought you'd be expecting me one of these days soon." His eyes passed beyond the dark man to the girl on the porch. "Looks like you had run into a little trouble here. Anything a sheriff could help you with?"

The girl must have noticed the star on his chest, for she had been looking tensely at Stewart, and now she brought the muzzle of her rifle around at him and said, in a tight voice which had a desperate but determined note in it:

"I'm warning you! I don't care if you have got the law in back of you—I won't let you put us off if I can help it. It isn't legal and it isn't right!"

Stewart looked again at Creel. "Well, what's it all about?"

The big man smirked unpleasantly. "Here's a chance to do your stuff, lawman. This ranch belongs to me, and I'm just tryin' to make this little hellion get off it."

"It does not belong to you!" cried the girl. "It belongs to Ted and me, and you know it!"

"Maybe it did until your brother signed it over to me."

Stewart was eyeing the big man narrowly. "He signed it over?" he put in. "In writing?"

"Yeah." Creel fished in a pocket, brought out a folded paper which he handed to Stewart.

THE sheriff examined it briefly. It was a short, terse document, giving one Matthew Creel clear and complete title to the Box S ranch, all lands, buildings, and live stock pertaining to it, etc., and was signed in a scrawl which he interpreted as "Ted Stone."

Bill looked up at the girl. "This signature authentic?"

"Yes, but—"

"You see, she admits it," Creel interrupted. "So your duty's clear. Go ahead with the dispossession."

"Now just a second, Matt," said Bill, calmly, "don't get in such an all fired rush." He cast another glance around at Red Foster and the other gunman, and then at the girl, who was still facing them with that blazing determination in her eye and the gun unwavering. The sheriff indicated the deed with a punching forefinger. "How'd you come by this, anyway?" he demanded.

The big man stiffened slightly. "What the hell difference does that make? The gal admits it's legal, don't she?"

"I said, how'd you come by this?"

"Well—" Creel's bluster faded a

little before the cold stare of the sheriff. Finally he grumbled, "I won it in a poker game."

Stewart snorted. "What kind of a bluff are you tryin' to run, Creel?" he snapped. "You know a gamblin' debt ain't legally enforcible!"

And he calmly tore the deed into shreds, scattering the pieces upon the breeze that sang along the hilltop.

Creel had let out a curse and lunged his mount forward at that, but Stewart quickly reined away, dropping one hand upon the hardwood butt of his revolver.

"Take it easy, Creel!" he warned. "You too, Foster." The red-haired one stopped in the act of edging his pony around behind that of the sheriff. His bug eyes never left the hand which covered Stewart's revolver grip.

"I knew there was something phoney about this deal," Bill continued, "or you wouldn't be in on it. Well, I'm glad to see there's somebody on this range that you can't bluff out, or bully. And now the law's settin' in on the hand, and the law says: You can't get away with this kind of a deal."

Creel's face was thunderous with rage, but his voice was soft, a sibilant whisper, as he said: "Stewart, the last time you butted in on this range—"

"Yeah, I know. The last time I was here somebody pinned a little love letter onto my saddle. I don't reckon I need to tell you what was in it."

"No, I don't reckon you do!" Creel gritted. "But I'm addin' a P.S. right now, which says—'It still goes!'"

"Thanks. I'm glad to know where we stand. And I've got a message you can deliver for me, as soon as you get back to town."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"You can tell Tom Rankin that I'm lookin' for him."

Creel eyed him a long moment in silence; then his lips, under the black mustache, twisted into a smirk. "O. K.," he said, shortly. "I'll tell him."

With that last, Stewart knew that open warfare had been declared. Creel was admitting, openly and defiantly, that he had been responsible for Rankin's escape from jail, via the dynamite route, and that he had the murderer under his protection at Belmont, and was hereby freely challenging the law to do anything about it.

"Thanks," said the sheriff, nodding briefly; and Creel knew that the challenge had been accepted.

THE boss of Belmont threw another glance at the girl; then he spoke shortly to his men and the trio rode away without another word, down the trail to the river bank and town. Stewart kept his eye on them and his hand on his gun until they were well out of sight; then he turned in the saddle again just as a sharp clattering sound came from the porch.

In a glance he saw that the girl had let the rifle slip from her hands and go slithering down the steps. Eyes closed, face drained white, she was leaning limply against the vine-covered post at her side.

He was out of the saddle in an instant, and up the steps, his hands upon her arms to steady her. Her skin felt cold, and she was trembling slightly; but an instant later she had recovered and, straightening, passed a hand across her brow to push back the yellow curls that tumbled there.

"Thank you," she said, quietly. "I guess I just lost my nerve a minute, but —I'll be all right now."

Stewart dropped his hands from her arms and stood there a moment just looking at her, with something that was very nearly disbelief. Perhaps this was what was meant by the phrase "a beautiful woman." He would hardly be expected to know; but on the other hand, he did know that she beat anything he

had ever seen before. She was looking at him now with her deep violet eyes, and now the fresh color had come back into her soft cheeks, and— Well, he felt he had to say something, anything, rather than keep on standing here, just staring at her like a ninny.

So he fumbled for his hat brim. "Bill Stewart, Miss," he announced. "And sheriff of all the rest of this county, even if I don't draw much water on the Belmont range."

"I'm Willa Stone," she told him, "and I want to thank you for—what you've done."

"Shucks! That's just part of my job, keepin' skunks like Creel from gettin' away with their shady deals. However, I got to admit that it might help some if I knew a few more of the details about this run-in you had with him—that is, if it ain't too personal."

"Oh, no," she assured him. "I appreciate your interest. Please have a seat, and we can talk things over."

So they sat there on the porch, with the windmill clanking near at hand, while she told her story. It was simple enough. Her brother, Ted, who was three years her senior (making him about twenty-two, the sheriff calculated) had a certain wild streak in him, natural in one of his age, but unfortunate for these two orphans who were trying to carry on the little spread that their father had left them. Usually an efficient worker, Ted had lately drifted to cardplaying, and, naturally enough, fallen into the hands of Matt Creel and his sharks, at Belmont. Willa had tried in vain to stop him, but the boy was already in debt to Creel before she heard what he was up to, and despite her efforts he kept up, sinking in farther and farther, until at last Creel had forced him to sign over the ranch in payment.

As the Box S had been left in Ted's name, his sister had been unable to prevent that; but this play with the shotgun today had been her last desperate attempt to save the little spread from Creel.

"But, shucks!" exclaimed Stewart. "Don't Ted know gambling debts ain't legal? Or," he added, analysing the case more profoundly, "is he too scared of Creel to object?"

"It's partly that; but mainly it's his pride. Gambling debts may not be legal, but in this part of the country it's a matter of honor to make them good."

"Yeah, I know. So Ted doesn't figure he'd be doin' the square thing, not to let Creel have the Box S whether he's legally entitled to it or not, is that it?"

"Right. But I have my own share of the Stone pride, too; and I'm not going to let Creel have our little ranch if I can help it—no matter what Ted says about it."

There was a determination in her voice and in the set of her jaw, then, and an anger in her eyes that told Stewart this girl was ready to fight Creel and all of his men—single handed, if need be. And the picture returned to his mind, of her standing alone and holding off the big man and two of his gunners, at the point of her rifle. That had really taken nerve—nerve, perhaps, born of despair.

HE got out the makin's. "Is there any particular reason why Creel should be anxious to get this spread?" he asked, as he worked with papers and tobacco. "Or does he just see a chance to pick up something for nothin'?"

"I—don't know." The girl faltered. "But— After all, the Box S isn't worth a lot, but it's all Ted and I have in the world. If we lose it, I don't know what we'll ever do. Well, sometimes I have a terrible feeling that Creel wants it because then it would be easier for him to get his hands on Ted, and—and me."

"Yeah, I can understand that," mut-

tered Stewart. His face lost in the shadow of his hat brim as he ducked over the building of his smoke, he glanced up at her unnoticed—at the delicious form of her, and the lovely face beneath the crown of golden curls. After all, the boss of Belmont had eyes in his head; and besides, her attraction for him would undoubtedly be enhanced by the fact that she was the only person on the range who openly dared to defy his one-man rule. The girl's suspicions were, only too likely, well-founded. . . .

He glanced down again, noticed that, somehow or other, his steel-hard fingers had twisted the cigarette to shreds, and crumbs of the tobacco were spilled upon the white floor of the porch. Throwing the fragments of paper aside, he straightened and came to his feet with hands adjusting the heavy cartridge belt at his waist.

"Where's your brother now?" he asked her.

"I don't know." There was a touch of uneasiness in her voice. "He left for town this morning, early, and hasn't come back."

"Did he know Creel would be around this afternoon to claim the property?"

"Yes."

"And he ran off and left you to face it alone, eh?" Stewart spat over the railing. "That's a fine way for a brother to—"

But she was beside him with her hand upon his arm. "Please don't be unfair," she said. "Ted feels terrible and guilty about the whole thing, and at the last moment I suppose he just didn't think he could stand to be here. But, honestly, he's trying to do the right thing, as he sees it."

Stewart grunted. "Well, mebbe. But when I meet him I'm gonna tell him to beat it out here as quick as he—"

Her fingers had tightened suddenly on his arm. "You—you aren't going to Belmont, are you?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Why, sure! What else? I got business there."

"But—what about Creel? Those things he said to you—it sounded like a threat!"

"Sure it was a threat," he agreed, cheerfully. "But I can't afford to let a thing like that stop me. You heard him admit he's got Tom Rankin with him in Belmont, didn't you? Well, I came here to re-arrest Rankin for stage robbery and murder, and I can get Creel now for complicity in a jail break, if nothin' stronger. No, I've got a job cut out for me, and I wouldn't be fit to wear this badge if I didn't do it."

"But to ride to Belmont—alone! It's madness. Why, you'll never get into town alive, to say nothing about getting out of it."

"Nevertheless—" Suddenly, Stewart turned on her, almost savagely. "What kind of a jinx does Creel run on this range, anyhow?" he demanded. "He's only flesh and blood, and surely there must be enough decent people on this range that they could drive him out, if they'd only try."

She sighed and shook her head, wearily. "There are decent people," she agreed. "Not in the town, but on the ranches scattered around it. The trouble is we're not organized, and Creel's men are. They've simply taken the town over and live off the range like a bunch of parasites. They do nothing, they produce nothing; and they take their toll from every ranch in the vicinity."

"Well, then," cried the sheriff, raising his arms and dropping them, "why doesn't somebody do something?"

"Fear," she answered, simply. "Creel has spies—everywhere. His theory is that every man has his price, and he's got the money to buy them. There was Joe Whitney, for example; last year he

got all he could stand and started agitating for the formation of a vigilance committee. He worked carefully, picked his men; talked only to the ones he thought sure he could trust. Within a week he was found dead—murdered.

"So you see, we're helpless. A man isn't sure of his own neighbors."

HE looked at her thoughtfully. "How about yourself? Can you tell me the name of one man that you're sure of? Just one, that you can trust?"

"Yes. There's Tom Briggs, who owns the Two Star spread, up to the north."

He nodded. "I know the place. And you're certain about Briggs?"

"Absolutely certain. He's an old friend."

"Good!" Stewart turned and swung down the steps, and as he lifted into the saddle he said, "I'll see Briggs. And if it's physically possible I'm gonna scrape Creel and the rest of his scum off this range, for good and all. Will you wish me luck, Miss Stone?"

"From the bottom of my heart!" she answered. Then, with a smile: "And the name is Willa!"

Willa! The name, and the sound of her voice as she spoke it, echoed in his ears as he jogged his mount back along the trail to the river. How well the name suited her! It sounded like "willow," and made him think of the trees that bowed across the water of the stream. Yes, she was like that—graceful, beautiful. And the long silken fronds, that dripped above the current: That was the softness of her arms, when he put his hands upon them.

But now, as he drew closer to the trees, a new thought struck him with a force that set him up straight in the saddle and pulled his hand back upon the reins, as with slightly narrowed eyes he studied that spot where the trail disappeared into the willows. Growth was heavy there at the old bridge, a fine place for concealment.

Stewart frowned and shook his head; then he kneed his mount out of the trail and cut at an angle across the meadow, reaching the river several rods below the bridge. Here he swam his horse across the stream, dripping as it clambered up the opposite bank. Then back up the stream again, toward the bridge; until, in a thick clump of bushes close to the nearer end of it, and almost lost in the thick green shade, he saw a man crouched with his back to him, gun in hand, watching intently the spot where Stewart should have come through the trees and up across the slight arch of the wooden span.

There was no mistaking the man: it was the gunman who had been at the Box S with Creel and Red Foster; and the crudity of this ambush made Stewart smile a little, grimly.

Then he sat forward in the saddle, leaned one arm across the pommel, and said, casually: "Waitin' for somebody, mister?"

The man whirled, amazement and consternation in his face as he saw the sheriff; then he snapped his six-gun around in a desperate try.

Stewart was not caught napping. His right hand arced forward, sweeping up his own gun from its holster as it came. The Belmont gunman fired his first shot before he was quite in position, and he never got a chance for a second one; for, on the tail of the first explosion, the roar of Bill's weapon boomed out and lead slapped the would-be ambusher in the chest, with a heavy hand. It pushed him back, arms flailing, into the depths of the bushes, which received him with a crash; the stain of sudden red showed against the green tracery of leaves.

"Round One!" announced the sheriff. "And I'm afraid it's mine, Mr. Creel."

Blowing smoke out of his gun barrel, he returned the weapon to its holster

and then, with only a brief final glance at the dead man in the brush, spoke gently to the nervous pony and continued on his way.

The sun was out of the sky and gray dusk was pouring over the land as he dropped down toward the bunched lights of the Two Star headquarters. On making enquiries, he found Tom Briggs in the living room—a long, low hall with exposed timbers showing black against the ceiling.

"I'm Bill Stewart—sheriff of this county," the visitor introduced himself.

"Yes?" The Two Star owner was a tall, dignified old man whose age showed itself only in the dead white of his bushy hair, while his skin was as soft and free of wrinkles as that of a youth, and carried the healthy flush of youth upon it, too.

"I'll get right to the point, Mr. Briggs. I've come to this range to clean it up, and I want to know how far I can depend on you to do your part."

"Well-l." Briggs was fumbling uneasily with an ash tray on the table, his eyes carefully avoiding those of the determined lawman. "You see, sheriff, I'm an old man, and I've got a big investment here. I can't afford the risk of tryin' to buck an organization like—"

STEWART cut him short. "I see. You're scared of Creel, is that it? Well, I can't waste any time arguing, but I will say this: If that mob is going to be cleaned out at all, it's got to be done right away, and with one blow if possible." He stepped nearer to the rancher. "I'll make you a proposition. As soon as I leave you, I'm ridin' to Belmont. If you'll round up every man you can get and surround the town, and then at some given moment—say, eight o'clock — hit that place with fire and lead from every direction at once, I'll promise to have Matt Creel and his head men done away with and all you'll have to do is pick off the smaller fry."

Briggs stared. "But man! How do you expect to get rid of Creel and his segundos as quick as that?"

"I dunno for sure. But I promise to do it—if you'll hold up your end of the bargain. What do you say?"

The rancher still faltered. "I—I'm not certain that—"

The sheriff was sizing him up with a clear, cold eye. "A friend of yours," he said, finally, "told me you could be relied on."

Briggs looked up. "A friend. Who?"

"Willa Stone."

That name accomplished what all the rest of Stewart's words had failed to do. Briggs straightened his shoulders, his blue eyes meeting those of the sheriff.

"I've known Willa ever since she was born," he said, simply. "I ain't never failed her yet, so—if she sent you to me, I'm ready to do my part!"

"Good! Now, how many men can you gather?"

"Well, I have a dozen riders of my own and maybe I can get one or two of the other ranchers."

"Round up what you can. And remember, at eight o'clock tonight—on the hour—hit that town with all you've got, and with your guns in your hands. But it's got to be at eight sharp, so I'll know just when to expect you—a minute sooner or later might throw everything off."

Briggs held out his hand. "At eight sharp," he repeated. "We'll be there."

They shook hands briefly, firmly. Then Stewart was out the door and vaulting into the saddle; the ranch was already hustling into activity as he cantered off through the early night.

There was still a faint band of light across the western horizon, but overhead the stars were lighting up as the

sky faded dark behind them, and above the eastern hills the tip of a new moon showed. That moon had already slashed up into the sky, like a scimitar, for a considerable distance when Bill Stewart came to Belmont and rode down the main street.

It looked about like any other cow town, except that there were so many empty buildings. Most of the respectable element had seen fit to leave as time went on and Creel's mob grew, until now the town was practically in the hands of his organization; so that there were few signs of life along the street this evening, outside of the lights which poured from doors and windows of Matt Creel's main establishment, the Joker.

It was dark enough in the street, but Stewart kept his eyes open and his gun handy as he rode the length of it. He knew well enough how little his life was worth to him as long as he stayed in this outlaw hole, and he knew how big was the job he had cut out for himself.

At a hitch rack in the shadows across the street from the Joker he reined in and swung down, and as he did so he noticed, from the tail of his eye, a flicker of movement in the black alleyway between two buildings close at hand. So as he hit the earth, he ducked and swung under the hitching rail with his gun scooping out into his fingers and raising up for a line on that dark hole in the night.

Just in time, a whisper reached his ears. "Bill—don't shoot—it's Willa!"

He dropped the gun into its sheath and hurried to meet her as she stepped out of the alleyway. Her yellow dress looked white against the night, and so did her face as she looked up at him.

"Willa!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, it's—it's Ted! He didn't come home, and I got worried and rode in to see if I could find him."

"You must go back! At once! All hell's gonna bust loose in this town before the hour's up!"

"But I can't go without Ted! He's in there—I see him now and then as the door opens."

Her gesture indicated the lighted front of the Joker, across the way, and Stewart turned to look in that direction, frowning at this news. The presence of the girl's brother there would complicate things.

His gaze traveled up the face of the building to the second story level, above which an enormous false front carried the saloon to an immense height, compared to the smaller buildings around it. The windows on this upper floor were dark, looking blankly out upon the night—except for one half way back on the left side, from which a light splashed upon the wall of the house next door.

AS he looked at that reflection, he saw it suddenly blotted out and then brought to life again as a shadow passed across the lamp inside the room. Perhaps a private game was going on, there on the second floor of Creel's saloon.

Stewart turned back to the girl.

"What's your brother doin' in there?"

"I'm afraid he's drinking—I can see him standing at the bar, and he's been there quite awhile."

The sheriff frowned. "I wouldn't of thought he'd be hanging around Creel, after what Creel done to him."

"Oh, but Ted doesn't hold anything against him—you must understand that. He thinks losing the ranch is only a just payment for what he lost to Creel, and he still likes the man himself. I—I think he's even had an offer to join the gang." Her voice was tight on those last words.

"I begin to savvy. . . . What's your brother look like, Willa? How's he

dressed?"

"Why, he looks a good deal like me; and he's wearing a green shirt—"

"O. K. Wait here—I'll send him out to you."

And before she knew what he was doing, the sheriff had turned and started across the street toward the saloon. But then he heard a little cry behind him, and felt her hands pulling at his arm.

"No, no! You mustn't! Creel and Foster and a lot of others are in there—They'll shoot you down like a dog!"

He shook his arm loose. "Go back, will you?" he ordered. "I got a job to do, and this here is the only way I can get it done!"

Something of the half savage look in his eye must have frightened her, for the last he saw was the whiteness of her face and the roundness of her eyes and mouth as she gasped and then melted back into the shadows.

Stewart shrugged and turned again toward the saloon, his steps never faltering as he walked steadily across the rutted street toward the swinging doors. Beyond those doors were a roomful of guns eager to receive him; but time was short and there was no other way. . . .

His hand was on his gun as he pushed open the door and entered.

There were so many men in that room that the addition of one more went unnoticed—long enough, at any rate, for Stewart to line up the situation.

He recognized Red Foster by the color of his hair, and there were a few other faces that he remembered from his first visit, two months ago. But to his disappointment Tom Rankin was not there.

Matt Creel was, however—standing at the nearer end of the bar, with his back to the door, and talking to a youngster in a green shirt. Stewart glanced quickly at the yellow hair and handsome face of the boy. No, there was no mistaking Willa Stone's brother.

The sheriff stepped forward into the room, easily, silently; he walked over to the bar, right up behind Matt Creel, and his mouth was close to the big man's ear as he said, "Evenin', Matt!"

He saw the big man stiffen; there was a flash of brilliance from the big artificial diamond on his right hand, as the fingers tightened around an empty glass upon the bar. Then the boss of Belmont turned slowly and looked at the sheriff; looked also at the hand which the latter had on his gun.

"What's the matter, Creel?" asked Stewart. "You look like you'd seen a ghost."

He knew the man was thinking about the ambush he had laid at the bridge, and of the gunman who had never returned from it. Stewart let him wonder; he nodded to the boy.

"Hi, Ted!" he said pleasantly.

The boy's jaw dropped at this recognition, and the sheriff's gaze left him, lingered a moment on the right hand of Creel, which still clutched the empty glass. That ring! It was too obviously a phoney; why should Creel, rich as he was, wear a thing like that?

Then he thought he knew, and his eyes narrowed slightly.

By this time, everyone in the room had seen what was going on at the bar. Conversation ceased; games were interrupted; the click and whirl of roulette wheels died; only the mechanical piano tinkled on absurdly for a few minutes longer, and then the tune stopped and nobody started it again.

There was silence as every eye watched. At a word from Matt Creel every gun would have emptied itself at Stewart; but that word did not come, for the big man knew that with the sheriff's gun so near him, he was pretty close to death himself.

He still said nothing, but stood there

with his eyes glued to the sight of Stewart's hand on the butt of his weapon, ready to bring it out at a moment's notice.

It was Stewart who finally broke the silence. "I come to make you a proposition, Matt," he said. "You're a gambler; well, so am I, and I can tell when the odds are against me. I know there's no sense in tryin' to buck you and your setup, but I'm willin' to put it up to the cards."

The big man scowled. "What do you mean?"

"I'm leavin' town," Stewart lied. "If I ever come back, it's gonna be with an army behind me that's big enough to wipe your whole gang off the face of the earth. But before I go, I'm willin' to cut a deck for a hand of poker—or anything else you want to suggest—to see if I *do* come back or not.

"Put it this way: If you win, I agree to leave Belmont for good, and let you alone from now on."

"And if I lose?" growled the other.

Stewart looked at him steadily. "Then you give me Tom Rankin and I'll go anyway. Now, ain't that fair enough?"

CREEL was eying him, expecting a trick; but then he noticed that gun of Stewart's again, and realized that the sheriff was not inviting him, he was *ordering* him to play. And that whole roomful of gunmen couldn't help him, so long as Stewart remained as close as he was.

"O. K.," said Creel, finally, and indicated a table. "We'll play here."

"No." Stewart pointed to one that was against the wall, and near the door. "There."

The big man shrugged, and they walked over to it; twenty pairs of eyes followed them, but none of Creel's men moved. They were waiting for orders; and besides, there was something in the sportsmanship of the suggested game that appealed to their imagination. Stewart had counted on that.

But he kept his back turned the other way as he went with Creel across the room to the table. As he took the chair against the wall, he openly placed his gun on the table in front of him and kicked back the chair to his left, indicating that the big man should sit there. With a shrug, the big man obeyed.

Stewart motioned to Ted Stone. "Bring us a new deck, will you, kid?" he asked; and when the boy had got one from the bartender and brought it over, he indicated the seat at his right and Ted sat down. This gave the sheriff the whole sweep of the room before him, and his gun right under his fingers when he needed it.

The seal was broken, the deck placed on the green table top, and they cut for the deal. Stewart got a six, Creel a Jack. The big man began to shuffle.

"One round of draw to settle it," said the sheriff, and Creel dealt.

Two piles of cards began to grow upon the table; the cards flashed as Creel's nimble fingers flung them out.

Then suddenly the sheriff reached over, gripped him by the wrist, and turned the big right hand palm upward. The cards clattered to the table top.

"There, kid!" said Stewart. "Do you see now how Creel took your ranch away from you?"

With the muzzle of his gun he pointed at the artificial diamond—turned with its stone inward, toward the palm.

"In that mirror, he can see every card as it's dealt!"

"Why, the dirty cheatin'—" cried the youth, and started up from his chair with a hand going back for his gun.

"Stop it, kid!" shouted Stewart. "Don't start anything here or you'll never live to finish it!"

The boy hesitated. The gunmen in the room were crowding forward, now,

but the sheriff suddenly stabbed his gun-muzzle into his ribs of Matt Creel.

"Don't you try anything, either!" he snapped. "Or you'll have a dead boss!"

Perspiration was on the brow of the big man; he was helpless, for Stewart still had his right wrist clasped in an iron hand. "Don't shoot, men!" he gasped. "The buzzard'll plug me!"

Stewart spoke again to the boy. "Beat it, kid!" And, as the latter hesitated. "Go on, get out! Your sister's outside. Find her and take her home."

With great reluctance, Ted Stone put up his gun. "All right, mister," he grunted, "I'll go. But Matt Creel, if you ever so much as set foot on the Box S—you'll wish you hadn't!"

Stewart had his eyes on the crowd and did not watch him as he went out through the doors. As soon as the boy was gone, the sheriff stood up, dragging Creel to his feet with him.

"The bargain's off, Creel!" he said. "But I'm goin' now, and I'm takin' you with me! Come on!"

He kicked chairs out of his way as he sidled along the wall to the door. The card table went over as the big man, still in his grasp, came with him. Creel's face was a mask of terror. "Don't shoot, men!" he was babbling. "He'll plug me, sure! Don't shoot!"

What Stewart feared was that some of the men would fire anyway, and not give a damn what happened to their boss. But he had underestimated their loyalty. Many hands twitched near holster mouths, but not a gun was drawn.

Now he had reached the swinging doors and was backing through them, with Creel still in his grasp. It had been so simple! One bold stroke and the biggest part of his job was almost finished!

But at that moment he caught a glimpse of the gun barrel slicing down from behind him and twisted aside to avoid it. Creel broke loose from his grasp, dived forward into the room, and the twin doors came shut between them.

As he wheeled, Stewart saw the man who had struck at him—one of Creel's gunmen who, by some cruel stroke of fortune, had started into the saloon just as he was coming out! Their guns came up together, and lead slammed into the wall near Stewart's ear. Then the sheriff's weapon spoke and he saw the man grab at his chest and drop onto his knees there in the dust, coughing, then collapse upon his face in a pool of light from the door.

AN uproar had broken out inside, and the mob was charging for the street. Stewart clapped a couple of bullets through the green shutters; then turned and sprinted around the corner, along the left side of the building.

He glanced up as he ran. That single light was still burning, up there on the second floor, and the shade on the window was drawn. If Tom Rankin were not in the barroom, he might be up there. In fact, at that very moment a head was thrown in silhouette against the shade, in profile, and Stewart saw plainly the outline of a great beaked nose. Rankin, beyond a doubt!

Well, if boldness could be so effective, he would be bold again!

He ran on, turned down the back of the building. Here there was a rear door, leading to private gaming rooms. He tried the knob, found it unlocked, and slipped inside.

Here there was a dark hall, leading straight ahead to a partition and a door to the big front room, and pierced on either hand with the openings of gaming rooms—all dark, this evening. Against the rear wall, to the right, was a flight of stairs, and Stewart crept up, gun in hand, to the second floor.

Another hall, but one which reached clear to the front of the building, dividing this story in half. Three doors opened off at either hand, and there was a large open space at the rear, around the stairwell, where a railing ran around two sides of the oblong opening against the rear wall.

All this Stewart saw by the feeble light of a lamp fastened to the wall above the stairs. Advancing down the hall, he saw that all the doors were open on black and empty rooms, except the middle one at the right; that door was shut, and a line of light stained the carpet below.

Stewart went to that door at once, turned the knob, and, with his gun ready, threw it open.

The room was empty, although a lamp still burned on a round table in the center.

The sheriff stood there a moment, puzzled, with one hand on the knob; and as he did so, an unpleasant laugh suddenly sounded behind him and a voice said, "I reckon you was lookin' for me, wasn't you, sheriff?"

Stewart froze in the doorway. The voice belonged to Tom Rankin, and the murderer had him dead to rights, silhouetted clearly against the open door with Rankin behind him in the darkness of the hall.

The man laughed again, shortly, and Stewart heard him coming nearer. "Quite a surprise, Sheriff. I step out to see what all the shootin' is about and here you come up the stairs!"

The sheriff moved quickly, desperately. He leaped inside the room and to one side, hurling the door shut behind him, and just missing the bullet that plunged through the wood after him. He slipped on a small rug, fell heavily; and then two small holes came into the door as he threw lead through it, blindly, just to hold Rankin off.

He reloaded. Then he went to the table and put out the lamp, welcoming the shadows as they closed about him. The window. No, it was too great a drop to the ground.

Tom Rankin was shouting outside and firing off his gun to attract attention; now heavy feet were thundering up the stairs.

"I got him!" Rankin yelled. "Stewart! I got him trapped in there!"

Then the voice of Creel: "O. K. Some of you boys go in and get him."

Three of Stewart's bullets ripping through the door killed that suggestion.

"Nothing doin', Matt!" said one of the men, as the echoes of the shots died. "We ain't committin' suicide—not this evenin'!"

Creel cursed. "Stewart!" he bellowed. "We got you anyway. Come on out of there!"

The sheriff merely laughed. "Come in and get me—I'm waitin'."

There was silence then, while Stewart crouched there in the darkness, gun in hand, and the men outside debated what to do next. The silence was finally broken by the muffled voice of Red Foster, calling from below up the stairs. "Matt! Come here!"

STEWART heard Creel's heavy boots clump through the hall, heard him talking with Foster up and down the stairwell, although he could not make out what they were saying until finally Creel boomed: "Hurry, then—bring 'em up!"

Now Creel was coming back to the door, and at the same time three or four others could be heard upon the stairs.

"All right, Mister Sheriff," shouted the big man. "Mebbe you won't listen to me, but here's somethin' I reckon you will listen to. We got the Stone kids out here, and if you don't come out we'll plug the boy, and as for the girl—"

Said Red Foster: "Hey, Matt, mebbe he thinks we're kiddin' him. Mebbe he

don't think we really got 'em."

"Mebbe he don't. . . . Give the gal's arm a twist, Red, and show him."

For a long moment of agony Stewart crouched there, eyes staring into the dark, ears straining for sounds from beyond the door. He heard a vague movement, and the noise of heavy breathing, but that was all.

Then Creel grunted. "Harder!"

There was a sudden, stifled whimper from the girl.

And the boy shouted: "Damn you, Red Foster! Take your hands off her!"

Stewart clenched teeth, and the grip of the revolver cut into his palm. "That's enough, I reckon, Creel!" he snarled. "I'm comin' out!"

He had reached the door, and his hand was already on the knob, when the madness of the thing stopped him. For he knew well enough that the instant he appeared they would mow him down, and the girl and the boy would be no better off because of it.

He stepped back from the door then, and stood uncertain in the middle of the room as he tried to order his thoughts. For a moment it was so quiet that he could hear the ticking of his watch. . . .

His watch! Suddenly he remembered — Tom Briggs! Quickly he dragged the timepiece out and struck a match. It lacked thirty seconds of eight o'clock.

As the match went out Stewart swung back to the door and waited, the watch in one hand and his gun in the other. He wasn't beaten yet! If Briggs kept his word, in just thirty seconds he and his men would be pouring into town—creating a diversion that would give Stewart a fifty-fifty chance, and that was all he asked.

If Briggs kept his word! Yet as he crouched there in the dark silence, a gnawing uneasiness began to work at him. What if he had been mistaken in the man? He remembered now Briggs' curious attitude, which he had put down as fear, but which might have been something else. He remembered, too, the words of Willa Stone: "A man isn't sure of his own neighbors."

It seemed to Stewart that he had been waiting here a good deal longer than thirty seconds. He waited until the men outside grew suspicious and Creel called out, "Hey! Are you comin' out or not?"

THEN he struck another match and, with sinking heart, consulted his watch again. It told a full minute past eight! Briggs, if he were coming, would have been there on the hour. He had been betrayed!

The match flickered out, and Stewart tossed it savagely away. Despair took him once more to the window, but there was only the unbroken wall of the building between him and the ground.

Wait! Over to the left was the open window of the next room—almost six feet away, and yet—

Tom Rankin was saying: "He's tryin' a trick, Matt."

And Creel: "Mebbe so. Give the gal some more of it, Red."

Stewart was in the window, poised with his knees doubled up against his chest, left hand gripping one corner of the sill and heels wedged in the other. His gun, fully loaded, was in its holster; his right arm outstretched. . . .

Suddenly he leaped, his body swinging over like a pendulum toward that next black window. The fingers of his extended right hand just caught in the corner of it, caught and held, although the return swing of his body almost wrenched his arm from its socket.

He dangled there a moment. His face was pressed against the side of the building, and his arms were spread to their farthest extent between the win-

dows.

He felt his fingers slipping. . . . He let go with his left hand, swung over and got a better grip on the new window. Then, with a great effort, he pulled his legs up and went through into the room.

The door was standing open. Gun out, Stewart hurried to it silently.

Yellow light from the lamp above the stairs showed the scene to him. Matt Creel was there, and Rankin, and three others that he did not know. He missed Red Foster at first, but then he caught a glimpse of him standing behind the girl, while one of the others held a gun on Ted Stone.

Stewart's bullets had pushed them back away from the closed door, dividing them into two groups with a cleared space between. One lean fellow had been shoved back into the open door of the room through which the sheriff was now moving; over his shoulder Stewart could see Tom Rankin, with his great beaked nose, and beyond him, the huge form of Matt Creel. They were all watching the closed door of the room where they still thought Stewart was a prisoner.

The man in the doorway never knew what hit him. He slumped down without a sound. Stewart caught him as he fell, hurled his body at Tom Rankin, and then waded through to meet Creel as the big man whirled bringing up his gun, a shout upon his lips.

Stewart could have killed him then and there; but he had other things to think about. Instead, he grabbed his gun-wrist with one hand and shoved the muzzle of his own weapon hard into the man's stomach.

It all happened so quick that before the others knew what was going on the sheriff had taken Creel's gun away from him and had the big man in front of him as a shield. Tom Rankin threw off the unconscious gunman and whirled, but a bullet from Creel's weapon, held in Stewart's left hand, sent his six-gun slamming against the wall just behind his back.

"Hold it!" snapped the sheriff. "Another move and I'll plug your boss!"

The group stared at him, unnerved by the sudden way in which the tables had been turned. Matt Creel's face, so close to his own, was damp with fear; the lean man was moaning and twisting feebly on the carpet. Opposite Stewart, on the other side of the cleared space, he saw the yellow dress of the girl, and the white of her face above it. And there was the rusty head of Red Foster, rising behind her.

"Let her go!" ordered the sheriff. "I'll give you just five seconds before I pull the trigger!"

"Yeah?" snapped the red-haired one; and then Willa Stone's body seemed to twitch as though something hard had been thrust against her back. "Go on and shoot him, but I'll plug the girl!"

THAT stopped the sheriff. It was a deadlock! The suddenness with which the cards were falling took his breath for a moment; and then he saw bitterly how completely he had failed, and how much at the mercy he was of Matt Creel, even standing here with his gun thrust in the big man's ribs.

For he could not bring himself to shoot an unarmed man, even such a man as Matt Creel; but on the other hand, he knew Red Foster well enough to understand that the red-headed gunman was perfectly capable of keeping his threat and murdering the girl!

Still he hesitated, hating to throw away the only ace in his hand; and Foster, seeing that, suddenly grabbed Willa's arm with his free hand and started twisting it up behind her. "Throw away your guns, Stewart!" he ordered.

Sweat came out on the sheriff's brow

as he saw the pain which flooded the face of the girl, but she shook her head at him a little, tried to speak and tell him to go on, no matter what they did to her.

"Throw 'em away, damn you!" Foster gave another savage jerk and her knees sagged under the torture. "Throw 'em away, or I'll break her arm!"

It was more than the sheriff could stand. He groaned, let his arms drop futilely at his sides, defeated. . . .

*Bong! Bong!*

What sound was that?

*Bong! Bong! Bong!*

It came through the windows, it seemed to fill the air about them. . . .

Then, suddenly, Stewart knew. It was the clock on the town hall across the street, striking the hour! Eight o'clock! His own watch must have been some minutes fast. Then perhaps—

As the last stroke died, from far off a cry sounded in the night. . . . A sudden torrent of pounding hoofs, sweeping down upon the town. . . . The rattle of gunfire beginning in the streets below.

Tom Briggs had not betrayed him!

The effect on that group in the upper story hallway was startling. At the first sound of the attack, Creel's men froze in their tracks, staring at each other. From below there came a noise of crashing glassware, running feet, yells. A gun exploded down in the big room; then two together; then a whole volley of shots.

"What the hell!" exclaimed Red Foster. He turned toward the stairway at the back, and Willa Stone drooped in a dead faint toward the floor as he relaxed his hold on her arm.

But that gave Stewart his chance. His guns suddenly were up flaming. One of Creel's men put a bullet into the lintel of the door close to his head and then went down screaming, dead before he hit the floor. Matt Creel was stumbling backward, clawing for a second, hide-out gun. Tom Rankin was leaning down, going to one knee, scooping up the weapon that Stewart's lead had knocked from his hand.

And Ted Stone had gone into action. Ignoring the man who was supposed to keep a gun on him, he leaped straight at Red Foster as the latter whirled about; his left hand cut down on Foster's gun-arm; his right whipped across Foster's waist and dragged out his own gun, which the red-haired one had taken from him and shoved into his waistband. "There!" screamed the boy. "Take that, you torturer!" And he slammed the barrel of his gun across the man's mouth, crushing lips and shattering teeth. Foster fell back against the wall.

But now Ted's guard seemed to remember that he had a revolver in his hand, and he brought it up, the muzzle swinging point blank at the boy's unprotected back. Just before he pulled trigger, Stewart lined sights on him; the sheriff's gun roared, and the man toppled back through the door behind him, into one of the darkened rooms across the hall.

Now Creel and Rankin had their guns and both opened up at once. They ignored Ted Stone, emptied their lead at Stewart. Bullets clipped into the wall behind the sheriff, ripping up clouds of plaster. Something hot stung his right leg, then, but even as he felt himself going down he was throwing bullets with both hands full of hot gunmetal.

The whole building, the whole world seemed rocking under the impact of exploding powder. In every street of the town guns were slamming and men lay dying and dead.

Stewart was down on one knee. He saw the face of Tom Rankin behind its great beak of a nose, and put a bullet into the wall close to the murderer's

ear. Rankin fired and missed. Then Stewart's next shot took him in the jaw and the man dropped face forward into his own blood.

AND now Creel suddenly found himself alone, and he turned and fled. He came abreast of Ted Stone; lashed at him with his gunbarrel and put him on the floor. Then he was on his way, back down the hall to the rear stairway.

Both of Stewart's guns were empty. He tossed them aside. A few feet away he saw Tom Rankin's fallen weapon and lunged for it, snatched it up. Creel had reached the bannister around the stairwell now but as he turned left toward the head of the steps the sheriff plugged a bullet down the hall that passed inches in front of the big man and brought him up.

Creel whirled; the lamp above him glowed upon the silver of his hair and the black of his face as he emptied a chamber at the sheriff.

Stewart's weapon roared again. Creel jerked, seemed to pose a moment on tip toe with his head thrown back; the gun clattered from his fingers; then the boss of Belmont toppled backward, crashed through the flimsy railing, and headfirst into the black well of the stairs. . . .

The sheriff hobbled a little on his wounded leg as he got up and came down the hall. A glance showed him that Ted Stone was already coming around, so he gave all his attention to the girl.

He knelt beside her. As she lay, one white arm was still twisted under her; and he drew it tenderly forth, flexed it to be sure that Foster had not really injured it.

Then he slipped an arm about her shoulders, brought her to a sitting position. Her yellow hair was fragrant against his face. Then she opened her violet eyes and stared at him a moment, as though in unbelief.

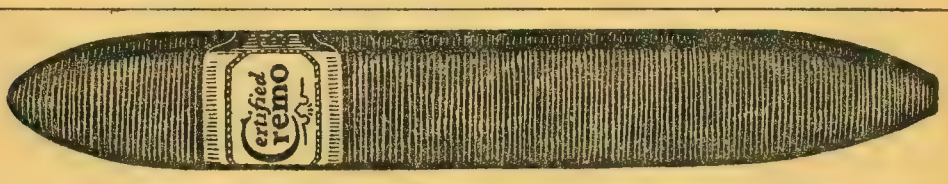
"Bill!" she said. "They—they didn't kill you!"

"No, darling. Everything's all right now."

For a moment even he did not recognize the word that he had called her. But then her arms were around his neck, suddenly, breathlessly, and their lips met.

From the streets below came final bursts of gunfire, and then, as though from one mighty throat, a great, triumphant shout; but the voice of Tom Briggs could be heard above the others.

"Hear that?" Stewart whispered. "Hear those men yelling? They have a right to! They've done a great thing tonight. They've bathed this town in blood and fire, but—they've washed it clean!"

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# *Born for Boothill*

By HARVEY MADDUX

*Author of "Unmarked Graves for Cow-thieves," etc.*

*"Stepp, I'm gonna kill you—I've gotta! Draw that gun!" Kelby said hoarsely*

***In all his wild and lawless days Kelby had known but one code—the code his renegade father had handed down to him—the bushwhack code of the owlhoot!***

JUD KELBY'S eyes were unreadable in the yellow light of the cabin's small interior. In no way did his wan, weary mask of a face betray the fact that he was about to kill a man, as he tapped thin, bony fingers against the butt of his holstered six-gun. Yet soon that gun would be hurling death from its muzzle.

Soon it would be wiping out the last link in a past which the law would be mighty interested in.

That thought brightened Kelby's pale eyes some, as he stared across the room at the man whom he intended to kill; the man whose identity he planned to use . . .

This man who called himself Bill Stepp, that Kelby had known but a week.

"Why not stay on here awhile?" Stepp was saying. "It gets dreary as hell in this forsaken place when a feller's alone. Say, until you drifted in, I hadn't seen anyone for months. Uh!"

Stepp grunted. He had spoken without taking his eyes off the gun he was cleaning and oiling. Now he glanced up, and for a moment the eyes of the two men met. They looked strangely alike, these two thrown together here in this tiny cabin on the edge of the desert. Thin, pallid-faced, cautious men.

A little out of place here, that's how they both seemed.

It was that likeness which had first given Kelby his idea of using Bill Stepp's identity. And now, lest the man read his thoughts, Kelby lowered his gaze and muttered:

"Maybe I'll stay, Stepp."

*Maybe* he would stay! Kelby was amused. Hell, hadn't he already planned to stay? Only Stepp wouldn't be knowing anything about it. In a little while, Bill Stepp would be dead—

and Jud Kelby would be using his name . . .

This lonely spot would make a swell hideout. And Stepp himself had admitted living a secluded, lonely life during his four-year stay in these parts. No acquaintances—and only an occasional desert rat drifting by. A trip to town once a month or so for groceries. Looking as near alike as they did, it shouldn't be hard to pose as Stepp. A beard would help. . . .

Stepp was still busy oiling his gun. But absorbed though he seemed, he kept on talking.

"Prospectin's good, and there's game a-plenty back in the hills. No need hurryin' your decision, though. Think it over awhile. . . ."

Kelby's lean body stiffened. His hand tightened on the gun-grip he'd been fingering. It made him vaguely nervous, all this talk of Stepp's about staying on. Hospitality was something Kelby didn't savvy. In all his wild and lawless days, Kelby had known but one code; the code his outlaw father had handed down to him. *Take* what you want—and to hell with the difference. Now, Kelby wondered suddenly if Stepp wasn't stringing him.

His eyes narrowed in the smoky glare of the kerosene lamp, as he said dryly: "Sure. Sure, I'll think it over." And strode slowly across the room to stand and stare through a window into the darkness.

But he just pretended he was staring outside. He was really studying Stepp's reflection in the dirty window pane. Stepp seemed plenty sincere enough, but—

Kelby frowned thoughtfully. Again his fingers tightened on the gun as he half-drew it from its holster, but snugged it back into place with a barely audible grunt which sounded very much like disgust.

Stepp glanced curiously at him, then began thumbing shells into the loading gate of his freshly-cleaned weapon. Earlier in the evening, they'd been up on the sagebrush flats above the cabin, shooting jacks.

Kelby had tried hard in the few days he'd been here, to pry into Stepp's past. He hadn't mentioned anything about his own affairs, and for a very good reason. But his prying had netted him little. Once, Stepp had vaguely mention a wife and kid. But he had shut up quick, like he was scared he had said too much.

Acted like he had something on his mind—something he was scared to mention to anybody. . . .

Kelby had decided that he must act quickly—mustn't stretch his luck too far. That luck had already carried him back from the brink of a prison gallows. It might suddenly fail him next time. His mind flashingly covered events of the recent past which had steered his trail here to this tiny cabin. The incessant moaning of desert wind outside seemed to beat a jubilant second to his thoughts.

In the eyes of the law, he was dead. He had turned it so many times in his mind, he knew he couldn't be wrong. He was dead.

So was that lanky, persistent deputy sheriff who had been bringing him back to Custer City to hang for a killing that had taken place during a holdup. One of the bunch had been captured, squealed. But that deputy was dead now, and his body might be found at some future time, floating in the muddy, swollen waters of the Missoula —manacled to the battered, unrecognizable remains of the stage driver who had foolishly tackled that rain-drenched road in his haste to get a dangerous prisoner across to Custer City.

CUSTER CITY lay miles behind now. They'd never suspect that

those manacled remains weren't those of Jud Kelby's. Just as they'd never know that Kelby hadn't really been killed, as that hurrying stage plunged to its doom in the muddy, seething waters of the Missoula. A cloudburst had washed the road away, and the driver had been unable to see it in the blinding rain.

Somehow, Kelby had fought that raging torrent to shore, found the deputy's keys—and gone back to recover the body of the dead driver from the wreckage. After manacling those two together, he had shoved them to whatever fate the stream might decree. More than likely they'd never be found. But if they were—

Well, Kelby was free—and the law would have but an unrecognizable *corpus delicti* on its hands.

Miles of burning, torturing desert sands lay behind Kelby. Miles of heat and hunger, hopelessness and thirst. Less than a week ago, it was, he had stumbled like a wan ghost out of that flaming hell of a desert, to come upon this snug hideaway. At least, that's how Kelby considered it—a hideaway.

It mattered not that Stepp had taken him in without question; had offered him food and friendly shelter. Handed down to Kelby by his outlaw dad, through bitter, ruthless years of struggle against all that was law-abiding, Kelby had learned one thing well. To look out for himself, with total disregard for others.

Now, the time had come to kill Bill Stepp. But, like a slap in the face, Kelby was suddenly aware of the fact that the thought was distasteful—that he actually hated it! There was something of calm resignation about Stepp; like as if he somehow knew that he was doomed . . .

Kelby knew too, with startling surety, that he had come as near to liking Bill Stepp, as he ever had any living man. And the realization made him resentful, angry. Yet there was that law of self-preservation driving him on. It would have to be either Stepp, or himself! There was no other way.

He whirled away from the window, facing Stepp. His face was twisted now, mirroring emotions which he failed to understand. Never in his life, had he flinched at shooting another man.

He did now. Half-crouched, his hand was poised talonlike above his still holstered gun. It wasn't at all the way he had planned it—not at all.

"Stepp, I'm gonna kill you—I've *gotta!*" he said hoarsely. "But I'm giving you a chance to draw. I'm giving you a chance—but I don't know why! Draw that gun, you hear? *Draw that gun!*"

Bill Stepp's face was a frozen mask of surprise. As he stared across the room at Kelby, all color drained from his features, leaving them haggard, pained with astonishment. But he wasn't afraid, Kelby could see that. Stepp knew that he was going to die—he could see it in Jud Kelby's wild-eyed stare. But he wasn't afraid. His expression was more like he was seeing something sacred being ruthlessly destroyed before his very eyes.

And it filled Kelby with sudden, nameless dread.

"Draw!" he shouted, and licked lips gone deathly dry. "I'm killin' you—I'm taking this cabin, and I'm borrowin' *your* name! There ain't anything but a hangnoose waitin' me, if I don't. Draw—or damned if I don't kill you anyway! What's the matter, scared?"

He knew that Stepp wasn't scared. He was just using that for an excuse to convince himself that that was what was wrong.

Stepp shook his head, slowly. "No, I ain't scared. But, Jud, I—I've got a wife and kid. . . . Waitin' over in

Coeur d'Alene. Reckon you wouldn't know what it was like, havin' a woman eating her heart out for you. . . ."

The only woman of any importance in Kelby's life, had been a kid sister—and he didn't like to think of her. When just kids, his dad had put up money; given her a different name with foster parents. Mona, that's what the Kennedys had named her. Maybe Mona was married now. Maybe—

For the first time, Kelby noticed that Stepp hadn't even holstered his gun, after cleaning it. Stepp still had that gun in his hands—and it was loaded now!

But instead of trying to use it, Stepp was stuffing it back in its holster. And now he was walking toward Kelby, disregarding Kelby's gun, pulling something from an inner pocket with fingers that trembled some. It was a photograph; faded, worn.

He held it out for Kelby to see.

"No, I ain't scared," he repeated, softly. "But I killed a man once—because he was trying to rob me of my home, because he was trying to separate me from my wife and kid. Sam Trent, was his name. I killed him in a fair-and-square fight, but Trent's partner swore I'd murdered him. See. . . ." Stepp was holding the photograph out. "It's a picture of Mona and the kid."

Kelby's thoughts reeled. Mona—that was the name they'd given his kid sister! At first he'd been suspicious as Stepp came toward him. But now he could see by the droop of Stepp's shoulders, by the pallid weariness of his face, that Stepp wasn't trying to trick him. He looked at the photograph and found a sweet-faced woman and curly-headed boy staring back at him. Some inner voice whispered to Kelby that it was his sister, all right. . . .

STEPP'S shoulders were squaring. He was looking into Kelby's eyes without flinching.

"Shoot, if you like!" he sneered. "Maybe you'd be doing me a favor. Killing Trent didn't keep me from losing my wife and kid. I gave up everything and skipped town, because I knew I wouldn't get a fair trial with Decker, Trent's partner, swearing he saw me shoot from ambush. That's why I felt I'd like to help you—that maybe you hadn't had a fair deal. I took you in, trusted you—even though I saw the marks on your wrists where you'd worn the handcuffs. But now you've turned on me like a snake. . . . Well, go ahead and shoot, damn you!"

Kelby felt again that feeling he'd had the night the stage had plunged into the swollen, icy Missoula. So that was what had been bothering Stepp—that was the reason he had chosen this secluded spot? Stepp was just as much a fugitive as he was! Kelby didn't know what it was like losing a home, or a wife, or a kid. But he had seen his father's little band of outlaws led into a gun-trap; a trap as ruthless as could have been conceived by any bunch of killers.

Thoughts of it stirred bitter memories in Kelby's soul; memories which vaguely troubled him now. Funny how these things turned out. He had planned all along to kill Bill Stepp—and now he wasn't so sure what to do.

Stepp's voice was suddenly droning into his thoughts again.

"After I come here, I told myself I didn't give a damn—that nothing mattered. Funny, though. I got a letter from Mona not long ago, saying she'd moved from Coeur d'Alene. Somehow, she'd kept at it until she'd located me—wanted me to join them and start in all over again where nobody would know us . . ." He paused, and his shoulders sagged again. "I figgered it wouldn't be any use, and when you came along I sort of thought it would be easier. But now—"

The sneer in his voice, the look in his eyes—they struck Kelby like a slap to the face.

His gun—a spare weapon of Stepp's—flashed into his hand. Why the hell should he be getting sentimental over a sister he hadn't seen in twenty years? What the hell did he care about Stepp and his curly-headed kid? He leveled the gun, just above the heart—and stopped. He tried his best to give the trigger that tiny squeeze necessary. Sweat streamed down Kelby's face, with Stepp just standing there sneering at him.

There rose before Kelby's eyes a picture. The picture of a grinning, curly-headed kid. Suddenly the gun was sagging in Kelby's fingers. And a hoarse voice he didn't recognize as his own was saying:

"You win, Stepp. Go back to 'em—now." His tones were raised in sudden fury, "Get out—you hear? Get the hell out—before I change my mind and kill you!"

Stepp just stood and stared for a moment, and the expression on his face wasn't quite so condemning now. Then he crossed the room hurriedly, and began stuffing odds and ends of things into a small packsack. His hands were suddenly trembling, his eyes burning with eagerness. That done, he stood for an interval in the center of the room, looking at Kelby with eyes that were a little uncertain, doubtful.

"Get going," snapped Kelby. "One minute, though. That picture of the—the kid. . . . Leave that picture here, Stepp."

Anger flared in Bill Stepp's eyes. "Be damned if I do," he growled.

Kelby still had his gun leveled. His knuckles whitened on the grip. His voice suddenly had the snap of a whip.

"Leave that picture—if you wanta go through that door alive!"

"Why, you—" Stepp got a grip on himself by visible effort, drew the picture from his pocket, and flipped it onto a crude table in the center of the small room. Then he gave Kelby a close stare, half angry, half pitying, and, turning, faded into the darkness.

How long he stood there, Kelby never knew. Outside, the moan of desert wind was like a thousand soft voices, raised mockingly. Voices of ghosts gone by; voices of men he'd killed. They seemed to raise in volume, then die and, thrusting his gun into its holster, Kelby suddenly hurled himself at the door, to scream savage curses that were lost on the night air.

Or maybe not entirely lost. It seemed that he could hear dim echoes come rolling back up the rocky trail which led to the cabin from the desert below. Echoes of grim footsteps which crept closer with measured, ghostly tread; creeping ever forward, hopelessly hemming him in. They grew plainer, and Kelby cursed again. He'd been a damn fool, letting Stepp get away. Stepp would be bound to talk, and the law would be on Kelby's trail once more—as ruthlessly hemming him in as those footsteps were doing now.

Slow, plodding footsteps of the dead—

Kelby tilted his head suddenly to listen. There were footsteps coming up the trail, all right. But they were no longer ghostly—but real, live footsteps that sounded plainly now above the whispering moan of the wind!

BILL STEPP coming back? Kelby started to draw his gun, but thought better of it. A moment later he was sorry that he hadn't, for with a crash of glass, a gun-barrel was thrust through that tiny side window. And even as he turned there in the doorway, another gun was thrust into his back.

"Just keep steady," growled a voice. "Now. Move yonder into the room.

. . ." Kelby was literally pushed into the room with the end of the gun. A big man wearing a star shuffled into the room behind him. The big man said suddenly: "Your name Bill Stepp, hombre?"

Kelby turned. The fellow at the window, a squat, square-faced man, came around to the doorway, and another tall, lean man entered with him. Three of them. Kelby felt that old helplessness stealing over him, but it passed quickly. For once in his life, Kelby knew that these men weren't after a gent named Jud Kelby. No. This sheriff here was looking for a man who called himself Bill Stepp!

Kelby had to grin at that one. He grinned openly, and the sheriff's tone sounded mad.

"See here, this ain't no joke. Some fellers down in town said there was a Bill Stepp living around here. Is your name Bill Stepp?"

Kelby was silent for so long that the sheriff was framing an angry oath on his lips, when Kelby finally answered.

"Yeah," nodded Kelby. "I'm Bill Stepp."

"Swell." The big sheriff came forward, dangling a pair of handcuffs in his free hand. "Been a long trail, ain't it, Stepp? But it's ended now. Your looks are sure different from when I last see yuh. But then, being hunted four years sure changes a man's looks—considerable. Yessir—"

The big lawman jerked to an abrupt halt, the gun in his hand steadying. Kelby had taken a couple of quick steps backwards. He was standing tense now, and the look on his face wasn't at all reassuring. He was staring at those cuffs like a man fascinated, his eyes flinty hard.

"Not them things, Sheriff!" he cried. "I'll come peaceable."

For the first time, the stocky man spoke up, and Kelby's glance swung toward him.

"Don't you take no chances on him, Jim Hall. Hadn't been for keepin' an eye out on his wife's movements, and trailin' him by the letter she sent, we'd *still* be huntin' him. Go ahead, put the 'cuffs on 'im, Jim."

Kelby didn't like this short, square-faced man. Reminded him too much of an hombre who would hide behind the law to cover up his dirty work. And by the angry look the sheriff shot the short one, it was plain that he wasn't too greatly impressed, either.

"I reckon I kin handle this, Decker," he growled, frowning. "You 'member Decker, I guess, don't you, Stepp? Trent's partner. It was Decker who said you didn't give Sam Trent a fair shoot-out. . . ."

Kelby's glance had swung to the faded picture that Bill Stepp had tossed upon the table. Now Kelby walked over and picked it up. The photograph still in his hand, Kelby was suddenly leaning forward.

"Yeah, I remember him!" snarled Jud Kelby. "But it's a lie—and you ain't gettin' away with it, Decker! Not so long as I've got two hands."

The man called Decker took a fearful step backwards.

"See?" he whined. "What did I tell you, Sheriff? The man's turned into a regular outlaw! Why, dammit, Jim Hall—you ain't even taken his gun yet! What kind of sheriffin' you call that?"

The tall, thin man moved closer, and Kelby noticed then that he too wore a star.

"As Hall's deputy," said the tall man, "I'd advise you to put up your gun, Decker, and let the sheriff an' me handle this. You've finished your job—findin' Bill Stepp. Now it's up to Hall an' me."

While these three were ironing out their differences, Jud Kelby was having troubles of his own. If he was caught

now, it meant he'd probably hang in Stepp's place for the killing of Sam Trent. And if he tried to prove he wasn't Stepp, they'd probably investigate and find out who he *really* was. And there was that photograph in his hand. . . .

The thing struck Kelby as damn funny. Either way, he was due to hang.

But if the thing was finished here and now, they'd probably take it for granted that he *was* Bill Stepp, and let it go at that. Then Stepp could take Mona and the kid to new parts; they could start all over again. . . . A new start. Kelby wondered what it would be like to make a new start.

He'd like to know, and this seemed a swell chance to find out. Powdersmoke ending for Kelby, the outlaw, and then he could make a new start, too. . . .

Kelby laughed. He was laughing at himself. But they didn't know what it was he was laughing at. They eyed him curiously. He kept on laughing—and then his hand moved, suddenly. It was Kelby, the outlaw—the killer, going into action now.

THAT gun—Bill Stepp's gun—came swiftly into his hand. Decker's jaw was dropping, and his hand on his own gun showed white as he gripped it convulsively. His face was blotted out for an instant by a white, powdery puff of smoke. Then he was falling, and two smashing reports were rocking the room.

Sheriff Hall and his deputy had leaped toward Kelby.

"Here—Stepp!" the lawman warned. "None of that—" His voice was drowned by the crash of guns. Then his own weapon was booming.

Kelby had fired as he drew. A grimly satisfied look crossed his face, as a tiny hole appeared between Decker's eyes. There would be no lying witness to face Bill Stepp now. . . .

Kelby felt as if a mighty hand had struck him in the side where Decker's bullet had plowed. The floor reeled under him, and even as Decker was falling, Kelby stumbled from another staggering impact in the middle of his chest. Sheriff Hall's bullet, that. Nothing else for the lawman to do but shoot.

But this time, Jud Kelby had no argument with the law. He dropped the gun with a clatter, grinned at the sheriff, then raised the picture he held in his hand. Those hands trembled now, and Kelby's eyes were dimming. But he could still see on that faded photo the face of a curly-headed kid who wore a big grin. It seemed suddenly that he was grinning into Jud Kelby's eyes.

Small hands seemed to be caressing his wounds; they didn't seem to pain as bad as they might. . . .

Jud Kelby was still grinning, as he crumpled weakly to the floor.

Sheriff Hall and his deputy buried him there, in a little grave on the sagebrush flat above the cabin. The lawman erected a plain cross which read:

> Here lies Bill Stepp, who died while resisting arrest—August 3, 1878 . . .

The sheriff then addressed an envelope to Mrs. Bill Stepp, and in it he placed the picture of Bill Stepp's curly-headed little kid. Under the photo, Sheriff Hall jotted a brief note:

*"Stepp, you're a free man now. I allus did doubt Decker's story, but the odds were ag'in you. This gent who died for you, whoever he is, did something mighty swell. Don't let it be said that he died in vain. . . ."*

Big Sheriff Jim Hall hadn't been fooled none by that grin on Kelby's face. It was the grin of a man, who, after a long and tiring search, has found something which no man can part him from. Bill Stepp, facing eternal separation from his wife and kid, wouldn't have grinned a grin like that. . . .

# *Eternal Range Gets a Man*

## By CHARLES D. RICHARDSON, JR.

*Author of "Chip of a Lawman," etc.*

***Rustlers had taken over the cowtown of Cartwheel, and a range-hog had been elected mayor . . . Dan Crawford faced both across six-gun sights, when his own blood-brother became first citizen!***

DAN CRAWFORD rode into the cowtown of Cartwheel on the heels of a blinding dust storm. Dust swirled about Crawford's bronc, got in its inflamed nostrils and made it snort. Dust got in Crawford's own nose and throat, choking him. And dust swept up Cartwheel's main street, piled against the one-story buildings in little pyramids of gritty dirt. It sifted off the roofs and pecked against the windows.

Crawford passed the dust-coated figure of Ben Grimshaw. Ben owned the small Circle-Bell spread five miles north of Crawford's Star Horn C. Like Crawford, he had been hard hit by the ravaging dust, his steers were beginning to resemble scarecrows. He had been forced to put blinders on the animals, to save their eyes.

"Howdy," said Dan Crawford, choking.

Grimshaw never looked up. He stalked on through the swirling dust.

Dan Crawford bit his lip. The dust was bad enough without his friends going back on him. That made the second gent who'd snubbed him. First Tom Hornby, and now Grimshaw. Dan Crawford's teeth ground on the sand particles in his mouth. What in hell had come over those two? Maybe they just didn't see him. The rancher plodded on in the dust.

At the Crowbait Saloon he dismounted. Walt Crawford, Dan's brother, would be in there swilling liquor. That's about all Walt seemed to care for—drink and gambling with Britt Stasher. He didn't seem to think he ought to be back at the Star Horn C, helping Dan fight the dust. Dan Crawford stomped up the steps. He'd come ten miles in that dust, just to get Walt.

A man was standing on the porch. It was Andy Glovers of the Box 10. He had known Dan Crawford ever since childhood.

"Damn this dust," Andy said, coughing.

Dan nodded. He was glad of somebody to talk to. "It's hell," he agreed. "Walt in there?"

Glovers spat. In the dust haze, his eyes smouldered. "He's there, swillin' his head off. He's playin' poker with Britt Stasher. Dan, there's somethin' I got on my chest."

Crawford stared. "Spill it," he said.

"Just this," went on Glovers. "The boys figure you're lettin' them down. They say you're workin' up a secret agreement with Stasher. That you and him are in cahoots in this business of cleanin' out Mustang Valley."

"It's a lie!" exploded Dan Crawford.

Andy Glovers nodded. "I know it. But the boys think different. I argued myself hoarse with Ben and Tom. The dust seemed to clog their brains. In a way, you can't blame them. They been having a hell of a time with this dust. And the way your brother's actin', it looks—"

Dan Crawford shoved past him. Bitterly, he realized the truth of Andy's words. Britt Stasher was the only one who hadn't been hard hit. The hills cradling Britt's large Triangle X seemed to break up the dust, so that only a small part of it sifted on the

grazing land. And Stasher had several large waterholes. These he refused to share with his less fortunate neighbors. He had a big enough spread to graze the combined herds of Hornby, Grimshaw, Glovers and Crawford, and still have elbow room for his own steers.

But that wasn't what Stasher was out for. He was out to own Mustang Valley. He refused the other cattlemen help, and he was suspected of rustling their herds to hasten driving them out. He knew they couldn't hold out long against the combined threat of dust and rustling.

And Walter Crawford was palling around with a skunk like that. Dan Crawford cursed. No wonder Ben and Tom hadn't spoken. They had asked Dan to see if he couldn't influence Stasher. When Stasher refused, Dan and Walt should have cut him cold. Dan Crawford shoved inside the saloon.

The dust pall hung in here too. It seemed that half the town was in the room, trying to get away from the choking dust. Dan Crawford spotted his brother at a far table, strode over to him. "Come on home, Walt," he said quietly, ignoring the black looks of the giant Stasher and his two cronies. "There's work to do."

WALT CRAWFORD squinted up through bloodshot eyes. His once handsome face was flushed and puffy, and his hand shook as he slopped down his drink.

"What th' hell," he mumbled, leering at Dan. "I'm jush beginnin' tuh win. G'wan home yerself. Yuh make a better cownursie'n I do anyhow." He guffawed thickly at his crude joke.

Dan Crawford's lean fingers bit into Walt's shoulder. "Just the same, you're quittin'. Get goin'."

Britt Stasher took the chunk of a cigar from his mouth. "See here, Crawford, the kid wants to stay. Leave him alone." The scowls on the other two men with him deepened.

Abruptly, Dan Crawford's broad fist shot out, connected with Stasher's chin. The big man's head rocked. He crashed unconscious to the floor. Crawford had his gun out before the rest struck for their hips.

"Listen, you birds," the rancher clipped. "Nobody's stoppin' me from takin' Walt home, see. You and your pal Stasher are crooked as a dog's hind leg. Been cheatin' Walt right along. Just try and go for your guns, damn you." He started to drag the younger man from the table.

Walt shook him off. He stumbled drunkenly to his feet. "Lay off my friensh!" he slobbered at Dan. "I ain't goin' no place but right here. I don't give a damn if you are my brother. You're—a damn, meddlin' skunk! The ranch can go to hell as far as I care. Clear out!"

Dan Crawford stared across the muzzle of his gun. Slowly the .45 lowered. There was a hurt, flinty look in Dan's eyes as he holstered it.

"Okay," he said thickly. "If that's the way you want it." He spun on his heel, strode stiffly away.

Andy Glovers was near the doors with Tom Hornby and Ben Grimshaw. "Shore is hell, Dan," Andy said sympathetically.

Dan Crawford went over to his horse. It was hell all right, to have a brother like that. For years Dan had had to put up with it. Time after time, he'd gone into town and dragged Walt back. Dan spent half his time trying to keep Walt sober. It was wearing Dan down. The dust was putting on the finishing touches. If Stasher didn't let Dan's cattle in to graze on his land, Dan would be ruined.

And now Dan had just knocked Stasher out.

Crawford swore into the driving dust.

What Walt had said to him cut him like a knife. Walt had never talked that bad before. As if he didn't give a damn about his brother. Dan Crawford forked his bronc, rode out into the dust. He'd just have to do something about Walt, to keep him from going to hell.

At the edge of town, Crawford went in to Doc Greeley's. Doc—a little, bald-headed gent who claimed to cure anything from a centipede to a gun-slick—was daubing futilely at the dust coat on his instruments.

He grinned wryly at the gray figure of Dan Crawford. "First customer I've had this week," he said. "Seems like gents're too busy fightin' the dust to git sick."

Crawford grabbed his arm. "Doc, I'm askin' yuh to do me a favor. A helluva important one."

Doc's sharp eyes narrowed. "Walt, again?"

Dan nodded. "Worse than ever. He's headed for hell on a one-way ticket." He proceeded to tell the physician what had happened. "Doc, I want you to throw a scare into Walt. Tell him he's got somethin' bad, that he's got to cut out drinkin'. Maybe it'll slow him down, maybe it won't. But it's worth the try. I can't do a damn thing. Stasher's got him buffaloed."

Doc Greeley traced dust figures on his blotter. "It's ag'in' my principles," he said slowly. "I never lied to a patient yet."

The rancher's neck corded. "Damn your principles! Think of Walt, man! He—"

Greeley shook his head stubbornly. "I'll have to think it over," he said.

THAT night, Walt Crawford came into the Star Horn C around ten-thirty. His face was still flushed but his eyes seemed a little brighter. He shook the layer of dust from his Stetson.

"Dan," he said, staring out at the hazed moon.

Dan Crawford looked up from his chair. He wanted to tell Walt what he thought of him, but felt too bad even to speak. He brought out his tobacco papers, built a nervous quirley.

"I just wanted to tell you," went on Walt, "that I'll be late again tomorrow. I might even stay in town for the night. A little deal with Britt Stasher."

Dan Crawford's quirley bounced on the floor. He jumped up, face blackening. "Stasher! Damnit, Walt, if you think I'm gonna stand—"

Walt faced his brother. "Dan," he said quietly. "This is between Britt and me, understand? I don't want you pokin' your nose in it." At the door of his room, he paused, stared long and hard at Dan. "I noticed them steers layin' in the north end of our spread as I come past. Yuh won't have to worry none about them after tomorrow. And Dan, Doc Greeley stopped me in town tonight. The old cuss got me in his office on the pretext of havin' some homemade gin, then gave me a physical examination. I hadda laugh like hell when he found there wasn't nothing wrong with me."

He disappeared into the room.

Dan Crawford sat a long time in his chair. He felt like riding back through the dust and pushing Doc Greeley's face in. Doc's principles had kept him from lying to Walt. They'd kept him from telling the lie which might have dragged Walt back to his senses. Now that Walt knew that he was physically okay, he'd hell around more than ever. Dismally, Dan Crawford wondered what Walt had meant by not worrying about the steers. Probably the latter figured on winning a pile from Britt Stasher. Dan cursed. Walt always was the bad apple in the Crawford crate.

The rancher was just preparing for

bed when the door opened amid a flurry of dust. Two men stumbled in, choking and spitting. They were Tom Hornby and Ben Grimshaw.

Grimshaw came to the point at once.

"Tom an' me had yuh wrong, Dan," he said gruffly. "The dust and that damn Britt Stasher sorta made us see red. We didn't think straight."

Tom Hornby nodded, shook the dust from his moustache. "We saw you punch Stasher. That was no lovetap, pardner. By gosh, it took 'em a hull half hour to bring the skunk around."

Grimshaw grunted. "And that ain't all. Tell 'im what we found in Stasher's pants, Tom."

Tom Hornby chuckled.

"Ben an' me slid into the room where they laid Britt," he said. "We found a note in Britt's hip pocket from a gent on Andy Glover's Box 10. Said that things was ripe for another rustle. Andy's back in town now, jawin' with the sheriff. Dan, it's the chance of a lifetime to get the goods on Stasher. You an' me an' Ben here can lay for them ducks at Andy's place. The posse'll be on hand to cinch things."

Dan Crawford heard them in a fog. All he could think of was that this rustling of the Box 10 must be what his brother Walt had referred to—the deal Walt had on with Britt Stasher. Walt, his own brother, a common cowthief.

"But Walt—" Dan murmured.

Ben Grimshaw snorted. "We don't want Walt mixed up in this. He'd only hold us back. Better leave him swillin' at the Crowbait."

"Yeah," said Tom Hornby. "We want a gent with guts. See yuh at Andy's around midnight tomorrow, Dan. So long."

Dan Crawford didn't get any sleep that night. The nightmare of Walt and Britt Stasher kept grinning at him. Dan could see the whole thing clearly now. Britt was taking advantage of the dust storm to rustle from the various smaller spreads. He'd take the best animals from each, hide them on his own ranch where the dust wouldn't choke them. He'd soon have the entire valley to himself. Gents couldn't buck rustling and the dust.

AND Walt Crawford would be helping Stasher. Dan groaned in his bed. Britt probably had offered Walt a generous cut for his part in the rustle. He'd probably told Walt that the rustlers would lay off the Star Horn C. Walt was thick enough to believe it. No wonder he'd said things would be better.

Dan Crawford got up and lit his lamp. He took out his guns, began cleaning them.

The next day passed too quickly for Dan Crawford. He worked half-heartedly with his cattle, puttered around the ranchhouse stopping up holes that were letting in the dust. Walt already

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had left for town, before Dan had had a chance to stop him. Dan knew he mightn't see Walt again for a long time. Walt would be caught along with Britt Stasher when they tried to rustle the Box 10 herd. Dan wondered if they'd string Walt and Britt up for that. Sheriff Jim Blue had little sympathy for lawbusters.

It was bad enough for Walt to be caught rustling, but for Dan to be among the party that trapped him—that hurt like hell. Dan Crawford figured he'd just have to warn Walt off somehow, before the posse could cut loose with hot lead.

About a quarter to twelve, Crawford rode into the Box 10. Andy Glovers was storming in the dust on his porch. "That damn posse," he was growling as Dan came up. "It ain't here yet. What in hell—"

Dan Crawford grunted. Inwardly he hoped the posse would never get here. Perhaps he and Andy and the rest could scare off the Stasher bunch before anyone was hurt. Dan knew he was only kidding himself. Stasher wasn't the type to turn tail without a fight. Dan went inside with Andy to wait.

It was well on toward twelve-thirty before the sheriff and his men joined Andy Glovers' party. Andy, on a gray stallion, jerked his thumb toward the dust screen.

"We'll hide out in them willows," he shouted above the wind. "I figure Stasher'll come up that dry wash. Come on."

Through the dirt-choked gloom the men pounded. Once at the willows, they scattered, some on one side of the wash, the rest on the other. Dan Crawford, hunched on his roan jughead beside Ben Grimshaw, rolled a shaking quirley. The wind snapped at his sputtering match, put it out. Crawford swallowed. That's the way Walt would


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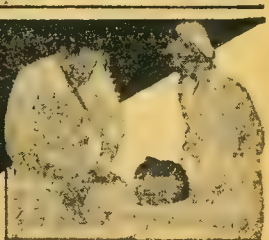

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go out if he tried to buck the posse set-up. Dan figured Walt hadn't the guts to buck anything. He'd always shied from gunfights in the past. He'd try to make a break, and a hell of a lot of good it would do him. Walt would go down with the rest.

Half an hour passed, three-quarters. Dan squinted through the stinging dust. He began to think that maybe Stasher wasn't going to show up. His hopes were blasted by Andy Glovers' sudden whistle.

"Here they come, boys, the whole damn bunch!"

Dan Crawford groaned, snaked out his .45. He, too, had seen that grim line of phantoms stringing out along the wash. It was too far to make out faces, but Dan could recognize Britt Stasher's towering figure. Somewhere near him would be Walt. Likely behind him. A curse spilled from Dan Crawford's lips. He wondered how Walt had trumped up enough nerve to come at all. Stasher's generous offer, no doubt.

"Wait until they start cleanin' the herd, then jump 'em," Andy Glovers was whispering.

The rustlers had reached the wire fence, two of them already hacking at the top strands. Above the whine of the wind, the parting wire shrieked humanly. It sounded like Walt Crawford would, when posse lead sieved him. Through the newly-cut opening, rode the rustlers. They began cutting out animals from the herd, driving them back to the wash.

Andy Glovers' white hand moved up toward his Stetson. It was the signal to cut loose. Dan Crawford tensed in the saddle.

At the same moment, a solitary shape loomed up in the dust to the right. Dan gulped. It was his brother Walt. He must have been late. Then Walt's clear voice rang out on the thick air:

"Haze them steers back where yuh got 'em, gents!"

Britt Stasher froze in his saddle. His fresh built loop sagged. "Crawford! What th' hell!"

Walt was riding up slowly, guns leveled. "I said haze 'em back. Stasher, I thank God my eyes were opened in time. I mighta went out not knowin' the skunk you are. You been playin' me for a sucker. Well, it don't wash. When yuh start rustlin' from my friends, I'm through with yuh. Call yore men off, Britt Stasher, or I cut loose. You'll get me, but not before I burn some of yuh down. Me, I don't count."

Dan Crawford's heart swelled. He'd been wrong about Walt. The kid had guts. He hadn't been in on the rustling at all. "Quick!" Dan bawled at the men about him. "Walt's give us the break we need. He can't hold 'em all night!"

THE posse had just moved out from the trees when hell cut loose. A lean gent coming up in back of Walt Crawford, fired pointblank at him. Walt spun like a top. His gun barked and the gent folded. In a flash Stasher had his own .45 out flaming. Walt Crawford sent a lance of flame at the Triangle X rancher. Stasher gave a hoarse cry, spilled from his saddle.

Other rustler guns were coughing. Bullets rapped at Walt Crawford's clothes like woodpeckers. Walt jerked a little, but his twin triggers worked steadily. Two more rustlers screwed to the dust.

Dan Crawford and the ranchers thundered up, spraying the group with lead. Grimly, Dan triggered down the men burning Walt. Dan's shoulder dripped red, his hat was off and blood washed his face. Shaking the sticky stuff from his eyes, he flashed up to Walt in time to catch him as he poured from his saddle.

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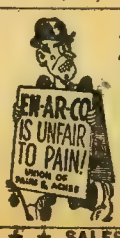

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Beneath the spray of bullets, Dan cradled his brother's slashed face in his arms. "Why'd yuh do it?" he groaned. "Y-Yuh crazy kid!"

Walt Crawford grinned up through the dust. He was dying fast.

"Can't take . . . no credit," he gasped. "Was goin' . . . soon, anyhow. Dan, maybe this'll pay up . . . for some of the hell I caused yuh. I rid up to Stasher's to kill him. Figured . . . with him gone, you an' Andy an' Ben . . . an' the rest would have a chance. You can beat the dust now. Me, I don't . . . count. Was . . . goin' . . . anyhow. . . ."

The man's head rolled limp.

A little bald-headed gent rode up. It was Doc Greeley. "That damn fool!" he grated huskily, staring down at Walt. "I told him to take things easy."

Dan Crawford saw him through a growing mist. "Easy?"

Greeley spit sand. "Walt had a bum heart, Dan," he said. "I found it out when I got him over to my office last night. Only gave him a few days to live at the most. I rid out to your place tonight to let you know, figurin' you'd think I'd just been stringin' Walt, like you asked me to. Them rustler shots brought me here."

Sheriff Jim Blue rode up.

"We was wrong about Walt, Dan," he said warmly. "We never figured he was chummy with Stasher so's he could trap him. Walt had guts, Dan."

Dan Crawford nodded. He'd let them think that Walt had been stringing Stasher. It was little enough to do for his brother, the gent who had redeemed himself in the all-too-short hours left him. The gent who'd cleaned Mustang Valley of a skunk.

Dan Crawford looked down at the still form again, sighed. Somehow, his heart felt lighter, and the sting suddenly had left the driving dust. In the cold embrace of death, Walt Crawford had become a man.

# WIN $50

for the best name mailed in for exclusive friendship-romance club now forming. Be a charter member! Let me find your ideal mate! Dignified CONFIDENTIAL personal service. Special membership fee Men $2. Women $1. Must be member to enter contest. Contest closes Jan. 31, 1939. In event of ties, duplicate prizes will be awarded. Decision of judges final. Send personal description with fee to

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Let me bring you LOVE—ROMANCE and a HAPPY MARRIAGE. Many fine, sincere, wealthy members seeking mates. Meet someone near you through my SPECIAL STATE LISTS. Free, sealed, confidential information. SATISFACTION GUARANTEED or money refunded.

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Prostate gland acute or chronic, rheumatism, kidney and bladder sufferers send for FREE sample; amazing results.

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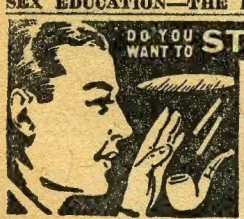


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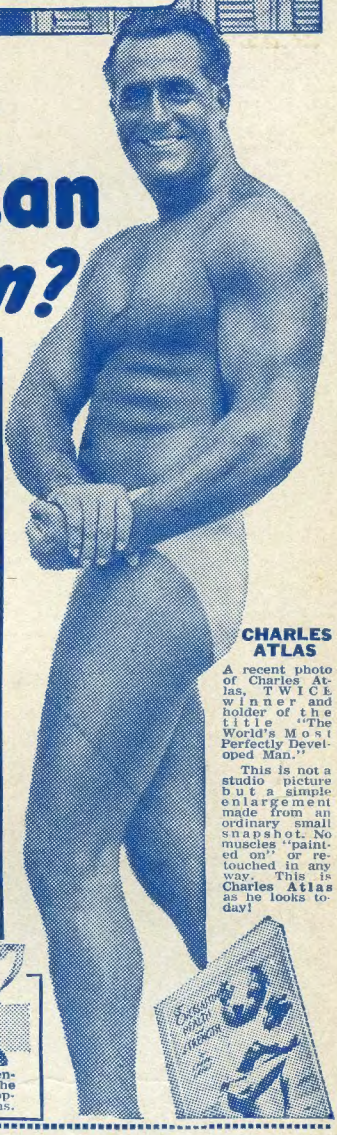

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"Started a week ago. Have put 3½ in. on chest (normal) and 2½ in. expanded."—F.S., N.Y.

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A recent photo of Charles Atlas, TWICE winner and holder of the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

This is not a studio picture but a simple enlargement made from an ordinary small snapshot. No muscles "painted on" or retouched in any way. This is **Charles Atlas** as he looks today!

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Find out—**at my risk!** Right in first 7 days I'll start to PROVE I can turn YOU into a man of might and muscle. And it will be the kind of PROOF you (and anyone else) can SEE, FEEL, MEASURE with a tape!

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